

Lund University

Department of Sociology

“Bullerbyn is dead”

Fear and Safety Perceptions of International Students in Relation to
Urban Design and Individual Life Trajectories

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Master's thesis: “Bullerbyn is dead”- Fear and Safety Perceptions of International Students in
Relation to Urban Design and Individual Life Trajectories; 30 credits

Spring Semester 2026

Supervisor: Associate professor & Senior lecturer Terese Anving

Word count: 19.141

Abstract

This thesis investigates how international students in Lund experience fear and safety in public spaces at nighttime, in relation to urban design, gender and individual life trajectories. Drawing on qualitative walk-along interviews with international students in Lund, the study explores how gender, cultural background and media narratives shape perceptions of risk and safety. The findings reveal a distinctly glocal dimension of fear: students interpret their surroundings through transnational experiences, comparing Lund to their home contexts while navigating unfamiliar cultural norms and limited access to local information. Gendered patterns were particularly evident, with female participants employing precautionary strategies and male participants framing safety through protective roles related to heteronormative masculinity norms. Urban design elements, such as lighting, greenery, architectural transparency etc. and neighborhood boundaries further influenced how students experienced safety. The study contributes to ongoing debates on intersectionality, glocal identity formation and Iris Marion Young's ideal of city life by showing how international students' perceptions of fear and safety are shaped through the interplay of global experiences and local urban conditions. The theoretical framework draws explicitly on the concepts of intersectional glocality, Young's vision of an inclusive urban environment and the role of heteronormative masculinity in fear perception. The results highlight the need to address neighborhood segregation and enhance visibility of public violence in order to foster safer and more inclusive urban environments.

Keywords: Gendered fear, Walk-along interviews, international students, masculine identity formation, glocality

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Popular science summary

Every year, thousands of international students move to Lund to study, bringing with them different cultures, experiences and expectations. Many arrive with the idea that Sweden is one of the safest countries in the world. Yet once they begin living in Lund, their everyday experiences of moving through the city, especially at night, turn out to be more complex. This thesis explores how these students understand fear and safety in public spaces and how their feelings are shaped by the city's design, their personal backgrounds and the stories they hear in the media.

To understand these experiences, the study used walk-along interviews. Instead of sitting in a room, the researcher walked through the city with each participant. This allowed students to point to real places- streets, parks, bus stops- and explain how they felt in those exact environments. This method made the conversations more relaxed and helped reveal details that might otherwise have been forgotten.

The findings show that gender plays a major role. Female students often said they felt safe in Lund, but still used strategies like avoiding certain routes or staying alert when walking alone at night. Male students, on the other hand, tended to see themselves as protectors of female friends, which reflects common ideas about masculinity and responsibility.

Cultural background also mattered. Students from large or less safe cities were more cautious, even though they appreciated Lund's calmer atmosphere. Many continued to follow news from both Sweden and their home countries. This mix of local and global influences, known as glocality, shaped how they interpreted safety in their new environment.

Urban design played a clear role as well. Good lighting, open views and active streets made students feel safer, while empty parks or poorly lit paths increased discomfort. Students also talked about the importance of community: having other international students around made them feel more at home and less alone.

Overall, the study shows that safety is not just about crime statistics. It is about how people experience the city through their own histories, identities and daily routines. For international students in Lund, feeling safe is a combination of the city's design, their cultural background and the social networks they build. The results highlight the need for urban planning and university policies that take this diverse group into account by ensuring that Lund remains a welcoming and inclusive place for everyone.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Research aim & research questions	1
Background	2
Outline	4
Previous research on fear in public spaces	5
Gendered Fear	5
Fear of crime in Sweden	8
International Students at risk	10
Research gap	11
Theory & Concepts	12
The theory of the ideal city life	12
Glocality and intersectionality	13
Masculine identity and fear in public spaces	15
Method & Ethics	17
Walk-along Interview	17
Access to participants & interview process	19
Analytical process	20
Ethical considerations	21
Analysis	21
Gendered dimensions	21
<i>Urban design in relation to perceived safety in Lund</i>	21
<i>Precaution & protection strategies</i>	26
<i>Gendered fear</i>	30
Influence of cultural background & childhood on safety perception	33
Influence by the media & news	37
Living an international student life in Lund	40
Conclusion	44
Limitations	46
Literature	i
Appendix	vi
Interview-guide	vi
Map of walk-along interviews	vii

Introduction

Research aim & research questions

“Yes, but that's also because, yeah, because I'm a man. I know people, female persons, who wouldn't walk in Stadsparken, or who have encountered like, yeah, bad situations there. So, it's kind of, my personal view against the general situation, [...] because for me it's perfectly fine to walk there at night and for others it's not. But from my point of view, if I don't talk to others, then I would never know it's a problem for them. So, kind of, you feel like very privileged from the male's perspective to not have to think about safety aspects or your way home” (Maurice, 25).

This perspective was articulated by one of the male international students interviewed for this thesis, who described what he perceived as a male privilege: the ability to walk through Stadsparken in Lund at night without having to consider potential safety risks. The contrast between male and female experiences of being out at night became even more apparent when several participants referred to the case in Stockholm in December 2025, in which a 25-year-old woman was abducted from a public space and killed during the night (Sweden Herald, 29.12.2025). This incident not only highlighted the difference in how male and female students in Lund perceive vulnerability when going out, but also had a strong emotional impact on many international students. The intensity of their reactions to this event was one of the initial motivations for conducting the research presented in this thesis, highlighting the relevance of studying gendered fear and safety perceptions among international students.

Moreover, there is a severe research gap when it comes to researching the safety of international students (Cheung & Ryoo, 2021, p. 2), as they are presented with cultural differences and language barriers in the new country (ibid., p. 1). Hence this thesis is focusing on international students living in Lund, Sweden and their feeling of perceived safety and fear when going out at night. This will be connected to urban design and their individual life trajectories with the following overarching research question: How do international students experience fear and safety in public spaces at nighttime in Lund related to urban design and individual life trajectories?

Following sub research questions are of interest:

- How does gender influence the experienced level of fear and perception of safety?

- What impact do cultural differences including the media have on fear and safety perception?
- How does childhood and upbringing influence the current perception of fear and safety?

Background

According to previous research, scholars have clearly shown that individual characteristics shape perceptions of fear and risk, with gender emerging as the most decisive factor (Konrad & Reid, 2004, p. 400). A pronounced gender gap persists, as women often find themselves in a constant state of alert, aware that any physical or verbal incident could- in the worst case- escalate into sexual violence or rape (Konrad & Reid, 2004, p. 401). This stands in contrast to men, who generally do not experience everyday interactions as carrying the same potential for sexual violence (Hille, 1999, p. 111; Mehta, 1999, p. 77). Moreover, performances of masculine identity shape how men understand their role and position within spatial environments (Keel & Lee, 2025, p. 931). It is therefore essential to analyze perceptions of fear and safety from both perspectives. Further, urban design itself plays a pivotal role as well as the temporal and spatial dimensions through which safety is experienced (Hille, 1999, p. 115).

Turning to gendered perceptions of fear and safety, scholars have linked these differences to the historical dichotomy that associates the public realm with men and “male” traits, such as physical strength and aggression (Day et al., 2003, p. 312), while assigning women to the private sphere of care work (ibid., p. 6). When women enter public space, this dynamic becomes visible in what has been described as unequal gendered spatiality: “[...] masculine anxiety and hostility guard the public as a realm of men. What we have, in effect, are masculinized public spheres” (ibid., p. 6). Likewise, scholars argue that urban design potentially has historical roots in the labor division and the dichotomy of the public and private sphere- which shows a negative impact on city design (Falahatkar & Fast, 2023, p. 1). Architecture and urban planning have also been historically male-dominated fields, resulting in discrimination, safety concerns and accessibility problems for women and other marginalized groups (Limaki, 2024, p. 1).

Since the 1970s feminist research on urban design has emerged (Falahatkar & Fast, 2023, p. 3)- offering important alternatives. By addressing patriarchal elements embedded in city design, feminist planning seeks to promote gender inclusivity and diversity by incorporating marginalized voices into planning processes and ultimately contributing to a more just society (Limaki, 2024, p. 3). This is particularly relevant given that urban public spaces should serve all members of society equally- a principle captured in the notion of “the right to everyday life” (ibid., p. 4). Implementing feminist approaches in urban design therefore benefits all

marginalized groups (Escalante & Valdivia, 2015, p. 122), especially when their lived experiences are taken as a starting point, as “[...] women are experts about the places where they live” (ibid., p. 116) and their own safety measures.

While research has focused on women and racialized groups, less focus has been on international students abroad- also coined as vulnerable by some researchers (Cheung & Ryoo, 2021, p. 5). In this context, *vulnerability* refers not to the economic background but to unfamiliarity with the host country’s culture, language and institutional procedures. As a result, international students may take longer to access safety information or may be unaware of areas considered unsafe. In a study examining the safety education needs of international students in Korea the participants have indicated that they are in need of “meteorological disaster safety, sexual violence safety, and criminal fraud safety” education (ibid., p. 4). Although this study focused on general risk, the international students were clearly defined as a disaster-vulnerable group in general (ibid., p. 5).

Connecting this to Sweden and more specifically to Lund, the city appears as a relative safe city with a low crime index of 33 points (Statbase, n.d.). However, with 12,700 international students in Lund (Lund University, 25.03.2026), this group is considerably large and requires more research- particularly against the backdrop that the number of sexual assaults in Sweden in 2025 is among the highest recorded in the past decade, with only 2021 showing a slightly higher figure, differing by just 522 cases (Statista, 31.03.2026). The Swedish Crime Survey likewise shows that the feeling of safety and risk among the Swedish population is highly gendered with women feeling more unsafe at night than men (Kregert, 2024, p. 5), thus showing the need for researching the feeling of risk despite a low number of crimes. In general, Sweden still shows a high gendered trend in intimate partner violence (86% of offences were directed at women in 2022) and domestic violence (81% of offences against women in 2022) (European Institute for Gender Equality, n.d.). Likewise, the Swedish Gender Equality Agency has reported that the Government strategies to stop men’s violence against women are not sufficient and that women and girls are still restricted in their everyday life in Sweden (19.02.2026). This restriction becomes especially evident in girls and women choosing to stay at home during nighttime (The European Conservataive, 2025). Summarizing, Sweden is promoting a safe place for students (Europe Study, 2025), but there is limited research on the actual perception of risk, fear and safety in the everyday life of international students.

Outline

The thesis begins with a literature review covering gendered fear, the specific Swedish context, international students as a group at risk and the resulting research gap. This is followed by the theoretical framework, consisting of Young's theory of the ideal city life, the concept of glocality and intersectionality as well as the masculine identity construction in relation to fear management. After that the outline of the methodological approach and ethical considerations will be presented. The analysis chapter is structured around several thematic subtopics derived from the interview material. Finally, the thesis concludes with a discussion of the findings, their implications and limitations.

Previous research on fear in public spaces

The literature review begins by presenting key research on gendered fear in general before moving on to the Swedish context, highlighting research relevant to this geographical setting. Finally, previous studies concerning international students as a group at risk of crime will be outlined and the section concludes by summarizing the resulting research gap.

Gendered Fear

Starting with female-specific spatial coping strategies, such as avoidance of certain geographical areas, shows the need of being analyzed against the background of power relations in the process of urban design planning (ibid., p. 111). So-coined “gendered spatiality” (ibid., p. 111) is connected to space as a product of social relations and practices and hence it is important to contemplate urban design not as a place with free choice of movement, but as individual outcome of social power relations (ibid., p. 112). This phenomenon has several consequences, such as women identifying with the already prevalent attribution of “female weakness” which then in turn controls and restricts women’s behavior by them adhering to a “safe” code of conduct (Konrad & Reid, 2004, p. 403). As an example this can mean dressing accordingly, avoiding certain places and not being alone outside as a woman at night- although those strategies are all related to the concept of temporality, as Mehta puts it: “[...] women’s presence in many urban spaces is tolerated only within certain limits, which vary temporally” (1999, p. 75). Condemning women to feel unsafe at night in public spaces turns the city into a male-dominated heterosexual place with a “virtual curfew” for women (ibid., p. 113). With women choosing to stay inside they automatically give more power to men (ibid., p. 113) who “[...] are granted the independence of open access to the public sphere, a greater sense of safety, and freedom from the social censure that requires different behavior for “reputable” and “disreputable” women” (Konrad & Reid, 2004, p. 420).

It is also necessary to establish a clear understanding of the phenomenon of “gendered fear.” What emerges from previous research is the paradox of women being less likely to be victimized than man, but reporting a higher level of fear (Smith, 1988, 29; Ceccato, 2017, p. 163; Haandrikman & Johansson, 2023, p. 1238; Zubova, 2025, p. 18). A recurring trend in the literature of gendered fear is the explanation that women are more afraid due to the ongoing risk of sexual violence, their perceived physical vulnerability to men and the likeliness of victim blaming in case of public sexual assault (Valentine, 1989, p. 385). Also, Gordon and Riger follow this trajectory: “The only crime women fear more than rape is murder. [...] Most women experience fear of rape as a nagging, gnawing sense that something awful could happen [...]”

and a likewise omnipresent fear of victim blaming influences them (1989, p. 2). Konrad & Reid also suggest that women perceive themselves as more likely to become victims in the first place and secondly, that they consider themselves to be in a more vulnerable position to cope with the aftermath of a crime (2004, p. 401). Smith likewise mentions the prevalent approach in connection female fear to physical vulnerability as well as outlining the precaution approach, which states that women's fear makes them take precaution strategies which then in turn lead to a lower probability of being victimized than men (1988, p. 31). He however connects this to scholars presenting gendered fear as an irrational reasoning, while actually the number of violence happening by close intimates plays a pivotal role in generating gendered fear and cites Stanko by asking: "If a woman is afraid of her husband or boyfriend, how can she not be afraid of male strangers?" (ibid., p. 32). Smith conveys the opinion that if research would actually be able to capture the hidden figures of intimate partner violence against women, that this would lead to a shift in the vulnerability and precaution approach portraying women's fear as irrational (ibid., p. 37). Going in a different direction in their Scandinavian case study in terms of fear definition, Ceccato and Yates connect the feeling of safety of local residents to a high level of any sort of migration in their neighborhood- a creation of fear of the unknown and a dichotomy of us versus them (2020, p. 281). They draw on Sandercock's work that fear of crime can turn into fear of others which maximizes the social differences between local residents, which "[...] can give expression to us-them feelings (as part of an othering process, namely when one transforms the difference into otherness)" (ibid., p. 281).

While it is well established that women are more likely to be victims of sexual violence and men are more likely to be affected by violent crimes such as robbery (Konrad & Reid, 2004, p. 400), there is a growing call to include the male perspective in order to fully understand the complexity of gendered fear more broadly (ibid., p. 401). Masculine narratives such as maintaining control becomes evident in men trying to have an overview of their surroundings (Day et al., 2003, p. 317), as a feeling of loss of control can challenge the masculine identity (ibid., p. 314). Following this line of argumentation Keel and Lee argue that men see themselves as less vulnerable than women and hence as the protector (2025, p. 926), which ultimately stems from the performance of masculine identities (ibid., p. 931). However, Abraham et al. challenge this perception by stating that in their research study Swedish men do in fact express fear of crime, but intersectional factors such as low income or being foreign-born are the decisive influencing factors (2026, p. 9). The study finds that "native Swedish men may feel more ownership and rights to the public than immigrant men, which could cause foreign born men to

feel less secure and control over their environments”, pointing to the need of more intersectional research and a moving away from the general assumption that all men are fearless (ibid., p. 9). Srivastava on the other hand argues that public spaces provide a place for the reinforcement of male identities (2012, p. 21), showing “[...] that heterosexual men are seen to have a greater (if not exclusive) claim upon public space” (ibid., p. 25) and that overall public places are historically rooted in male dominance (ibid., p. 22).

A further emerging aspect concerns the comfort women derive from knowing their neighborhood in relation to their sense of safety- when in an unfamiliar area, they tend to assess the level of risk by observing physical features such as graffiti or rubbish on the streets (Valentine, 1989, p. 388). These findings are also coherent with a recent research study conducted in Finland: “the clustering of perceived risk into predictable hotspots demonstrates how local mental maps reinforce findings from international studies, specifically that women exhibit increased fear in areas with characteristics of concealment, limited options for exit, and ambiguous social presence“ (Zubova, 2025, p. 18). Haandrikman and Johansson however found out, that a sense of belonging did not make women less fearful as it did for men, but that perceiving their neighborhood at a standstill however did (2023, p. 1254) and overall that women are more afraid if they see their “[...] neighborhoods to be prone to aspects of disorder caused by human behavior” (ibid., p. 1256). One study researched female victimization and safety in public transportation in Sweden, where findings equally show that women are more afraid than men when using public transportation (Ceccato, 2017, p. 163) which calls for an adaption of urban planning to address these needs (ibid., p. 164).

Valentine further addresses the paradox of women fearing the public space instead of intimate partner violence and connects this to male behavior outside as being unpredictable and uncontrollable (Valentine, 1989, p. 386). He then draws the line to temporality- that women are always afraid at night, but during the day only in certain situations and spatial surroundings (ibid., p. 388), which also gets supported by Haandrikman and Johansson (2023, p. 1239). A strong argument made by multiple scholars is tied to women learning where they are allowed and safe to be at night (Valentine, 1989, p. 389)- a socialization into fear. That socialization process and the childhood of women strongly influences their fear perceptions, as weakness and passivity are attributed as female character traits (Konrad & Reid, 2004, p. 402) and it even has been argued that this non-existent teaching of standing up for themselves can in turn lead to a discouragement of learning how to defend themselves (Mehta, 1999, p. 71). Smith likewise mentions that women being socialized into timidity and passivity can attribute women to be

more fearful in general (1988, p. 31). Stanko follows this trajectory in stating that women are used to handling their sexual safety quietly, as “[...] an unspoken expectation of being a woman” (1990, p. 199). Gordon and Riger further depict the female fear as a lifelong process that starts with birth and continues through the life circle and that female fear in fact has become a social phenomenon (1989, p. 118).

Gendered fear can also be placed within a context of social control to maintain gender inequality, as certain scholars have argued (Pain, 1993, p.106). Valentine likewise portrays this standpoint as he coins the male dominance of spaces in relation to temporality as the spatial expression of patriarchy (1989, p. 389). Also, Hoffmann argues in her study about street harassment in Germany related to masculine identities in 2025: “Aside from maintaining the status quo, street harassment serves to control women’s behavior in public space” (p. 91)- highlighting the ongoing relevance of masculine power dynamics in everyday urban environment. However, Pain does contradict Valentine as the latter portrays the private area as more predictable and hence intimate partner violence is not perceived as fearful as crime committed by strangers, a hypothesis that Pain is rejecting (Pain, 1993, p. 72). Stanko supports that by stating that the existence of private violence in public discourse is being denied and hence normalizing it (1990, p. 9).

Finally, scholars acknowledge intersectional factors such as “[...] age, income and lifestyle“ (Valentine, 1989, p. 386) influencing the perceived fear (Gordon & Riger, 1989; Ceccato, 2017, p. 164; p. 9; Pain, 1993, p. 7). While intersectional factors are relevant, gendered fear can be described as a continuous state of alertness/anxiety (Pain, 1993, p. 65), which also converges with Stanko stating that despite of intersectional factors all women live in a continuum of unsafety (1990, p. 85). Ceccato and Yates furthermore point out that besides intersectional factors the perceived feeling of safety “[...] is embedded in a network of moral political geographies, that involves old and newer types of fears” (2020, p. 267). According to their research fear should not be seen as inherently gendered but more like a phenomenon everyone can experience to a different extent at a different time in life (ibid., p. 282).

Fear of crime in Sweden

Turning to the situation in Sweden this section aims to shed light on previous research of neighborhoods in Sweden in relation to crime/fear of crime connected to socio-economic factors and urban design approaches.

A higher crime rate is connected to socio-economic factors as a high rate of unemployment and social segregation leads to vulnerable environments according to Ibrahim, citing Brottsförebyggande rådet (Brå) (2023, p. 11). Nygren and Sjöberg likewise found out that in recent years the awareness in Sweden regarding implementing safety design in urban planning correlates with a rising level of fear of crime (2021, p. 1251). In trajectory with this Sjöberg points out that nowadays almost all Swedish municipalities measure fear of crime annually (2024, p. 52), showing a rising awareness of the relationship. According to her research Swedish findings concentrate on the physical order in relation to a safety feeling and hence producing a strong emphasis on physical prevention measurements (ibid., p. 52).

When focusing on neighborhoods and their relation to crime/fear of crime, a strong residential segregation as well as social polarization becomes evident, as the housing market is controlled largely by the market and therefore vulnerable groups have difficulties finding affordable housing, leading to a higher concentration of lower income groups living in the same neighborhood (Ibrahim, 2023, p. 18). Although here it is important to note the difference between crime and fear of crime: the Swedish Crime Survey clearly states that women are less likely to become the subject of most crimes such as robbery, assaults, fraud, but are researched to expose a higher level of fear when going out at night (Kregert, 2024, p. 5). This shows the existent discrepancy between actual crime and the fear of it. Sjöberg states that “[...] at the expense of socioeconomically vulnerable groups, planning and development are directed towards an imagined neoliberal subject: the wealthy, highly educated taxpayer” (2024, p. 45). The police hence has introduced a differentiation system of classifying vulnerable neighborhoods into being a) vulnerable (low socio-economic status and the local area being impacted by crime), b) at risk (meeting the characteristics but not yet fulfilling them) or c) particularly vulnerable (urgent situation with difficulties for law enforcement to operate) (Ibrahim, 2023, p. 12). These categorizations are found to be directly linked to perceived levels of unsafety, as research respondents in a Swedish study have linked feeling unsafe with places in general vulnerable neighborhoods (Gerell et al., 2025, p. 19).

Renovating homes and providing community access is said to be improving vulnerable neighborhoods (Ibrahim, 2023, p. 11). However, constructing a narrative that frames one group as providing safety and another as not, ultimately legitimizes approaches that seek to control certain places and people, for example through hostile and exclusionary urban design (Nygren & Sjöberg, 2021, p. 1258). This is also in line with research done by Sjöberg: “[...] means and strategies other than laws and/or regulations exist that are used to regulate the flow of people

in public spaces [in Sweden] and to steer away visible poverty and behaviors deemed disorderly” (2024, p. 49). Multiple scholars although have called for including a more intersectional approach when researching fear of crime in Sweden and especially focusing on the gender dimension (Sjöberg, 2024, p. 53), as it is shown that the responsibility for women to claim their place in public spaces is still their own instead of the safety agents in place (Nygren & Sjöberg, 2021, p. 1262).

While most scholars agree that rising social segregation within neighborhoods is linked to the exclusionary character of the Swedish housing market- producing vulnerable areas that foster feelings of unease- Gerell et al. call for a place-focused perspective on crime (2025, p. 1). This approach refers to researching the reasons why a specific neighborhood is perceived as unsafe, suggesting that certain features of environmental design generate fear of crime as they potentially be inviting certain groups of people, such as “scary” people in parks (ibid., p. 2).

International Students at risk

International students choose their study destination partly based on safety, with personal security even emerging as a key decision factor (Auckland et al., 2013, p. 15). Nevertheless, research on this topic remains limited (Cheung & Ryoo, 2021, p. 2). When looking into this phenomenon, incidents in Australia have been reported and researched, such as assaults against Indian students in May and June 2009 which included verbal as well as physical attacks like stabbing (Auckland et al., 2013, p. 16) and are often connected to racist motives (ibid, p. 19). Babacan et al. underline this factor by researching incidents against international students in Australia in the years from 2004 to 2008- including racist attacks, near-death physical attacks as well as stabbing attacks (2010, p. 11). Other scholars have examined incidents in which international students have been targeted abroad. In Russia, for example, students of color were advised to remain indoors on 20th April due to racist attacks linked to commemorations of Hitler’s birthday (Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2008, p. 3). Further cases include hostility towards international students in the United States after 9/11 (ibid., p. 4), Chinese students being victimized in New Zealand (ibid., p. 8) and the publication of a safety guide for international students in Great Britain recommending precautions such as attending house viewings with another person and sharing the address with one’s social network to avoid fraud (ibid., p. 11). Ultimately, Forbes-Mewett and Nyland return to the issue of inadequate safety for international students in Australia (ibid., p. 12).

Defining international students as part of “[...] a disaster-vulnerable group [...]” (Cheung & Ryoo, 2021, p. 5) is due to multiple reasons, such as cultural differences, language barriers,

reliance on secondary sources for news, (ibid., p. 1), loneliness, difficulty in getting help, being new to surroundings, no availability of private transportation (Auckland et al., 2013, p. 18), exposure to exploitation and dangerous workplace conditions (Babacan et al., 2010, p. 11). Forbes-Mewett and Nyland have connected the initial failing response of governments to not wanting to acknowledge the issue and scaring prospective students away, as they are benefiting the economy of the incoming country (2008, p. 7).

Scholars agree that international students are more at risk than domestic students (Auckland et al., 2013, p. 23; Babacan et al., 2010, p. 94). As one study found out, only half of the students concerned actually reported incidents to the police (Auckland et al., 2013, p. 21) and that they tend to implement their own safety strategies such as going out only in groups and staying inside at nighttime (ibid., p. 19). This shows the strong need to further research international students and their relation to crime as limited research is currently available (Cheung & Ryoo, 2021, p. 2).

Research gap

The research question *How do international students experience fear and safety in public spaces at nighttime in Lund related to urban design and individual life trajectories?* aims to address the literature gap resulting from the aforementioned sections. First of all, as has been shown in previous studies from other contexts, international students are more at risk than domestic students to become victims of crime, yet too little research has been conducted about this particular group (see Cheung & Ryoo, 2021). Second of all, Sweden sees a high rate of social segregation leading to vulnerable neighborhoods and in Lund 12.4% of the population lives in areas with socio-economic challenges (Segregationsbarometern, n.d.). As there should be no generalizations made about the financial situations of students, research has found out that “students depending on national public student support, international students, and students with less well-off parents reported the highest inability to cover unexpected expenses, underscoring that many study situations are precarious” (Gwosć, et al., 2024, p. 290). Further, this can be connected to the housing market, as scholars have shown, that students compete with low-income households to find adequate housing (Jones et al., 2000, p. 24), although this naturally cannot be assumed for all students. With 12.700 international students in Lund (Lund University, 2026) it is relevant to research the relation between the group of international students and their relationship to their spatial surroundings as research suggests a potential link between international students, socioeconomic status, housing situation and feeling of safety connected to their neighborhood. This is especially relevant as “[...] students are an ‘invisible

population' in policy terms, and have rarely had their voices heard in debates concerning housing debates" (Hubbard, 2008, p. 339).

Finally, as fear of crime is being measured annually in almost every Swedish municipality and interest has risen into the field of combining urban design with safety and spatial control, it is important to include a more intersectional approach and especially a gender perspective as "[...] the spotlight stays on spatial (dis)order, and safety measures concentrate[ing] on 'building away' unsafety/disorder" (Sjöberg, 2024, p. 53) instead of researching the underlying power relations. Hence this thesis combines the research into fear and safety related to gender and urban design of the group of interest- international students.

Theory & Concepts

Scholars have pointed out that there is a "[...] need for an audacious [city] planning practice that dares to break the rules if a planning imagination is to be developed that can meet the challenges of diversity, difference and otherness [...]" (Hudson & Rönnblom, 2020, p. 8), highlighting the need for an intersectional and alternative concept for urban planning. Furthermore, space producing gender equality or rather inequality, leads to the need of researching the effect of power relations such as gender, class and sexuality on gender equality (Rönnblom & Sandberg, 2016, p. 1752). Hence, this section will present the concept of *glocality* (Listerborn, 2013) combined with *intersectionality* (Crenshaw, 1989) which is highly relevant due to the globality of international students combined with local cultural adaption strategies in the new country of residence. Furthermore, the narrative of *masculine identity* in relation to fear management and perception (Connell, 2014; Day et al., 2003; Keel & Lee, 2025) and the proposed theory of the *ideal city life* (Young, 1990) are used for the following data analysis.

The theory of the ideal city life

Iris Marion Young has developed a theory of the ideal city that serves as an alternative to both individualism and the conventional notion of a unified community. She outlines that certain groups, such as feminists, socialists etc. favor an ideal of community, which ultimately leads to the exclusion of differences (Young, 1990, p. 227). This stems from a community normally having a specific characteristic in common that everyone identifies with and hence marginalizes those who do not belong to that specification (ibid., p. 229). Liberalism on the other hand constitutes itself in the individual focus on oneself and a consumer-oriented nature (ibid., p. 228) and "[...] denies difference by positing the self as a solid, self-sufficient unity, not defined by anything or anyone other than itself" (ibid., p. 229). Young juxtaposes her concept as an

alternative to this dichotomy by describing an utopia-like alternative of a city where different social groups exist which acknowledge each other's differences without exclusion or assimilation (ibid., p. 227).

According to her theory, social life in a city describes the living of strangers together by being influenced by spatial and temporal factors (ibid., p. 227). She coins this as "city life" which eventually manifests itself as a city environment existing of small clusters of social groups, networks, families- namely a broad accumulation of small communities (ibid., p. 237). Multiple virtues are the outcome of this ideal of a city, such as first and foremost shared problems of the people living in a city are not resolving into forming a homogenous community with the same interest and identification (ibid., p. 238)- it remains a diverse society. Further, the social differences that are often even more reinforced by city life should be recognized and acknowledged but not marginalized (ibid., p. 238). Those multiple subgroups within a city should overlap with each other instead of excluding groups and ideally one should not be able to notice borders between neighborhoods (ibid., p. 239). Likewise important is the multiuse of public spaces, as the mix of residential areas with infrastructure such as bars, parks and restaurants leads to encounters between different people and creates a neighborly feeling (ibid., p. 239). Ultimately, a city life with so many multiple characteristics poses an attractiveness for one to get out of his or her normal routine and discover something new and unfamiliar: "One takes pleasure in being drawn out of oneself to understand that there are other meanings, practices, perspectives on the city, and that one could learn or experience something more and different by interacting with them" (ibid., p. 240). Finally, the city provides public spaces where everyone can mingle and interact without being assimilated into one homogenous group (ibid., p. 240). All different groups should acknowledge each other's differences even without fully understanding them, thus creating a heterogeneous and diverse place (ibid., p. 241) as "the ideal of differentiated city life means in principle that people should not have power or authority to exclude persons or activities from public territory" (ibid., p. 255).

This concept is insofar relevant for the following analysis as Lund presents a multicultural place with a big share of international students forming a multicultural environment of differences. Applying this theory in the analysis serves to better understand the felt inclusion or exclusion of the international students interviewed in this project.

Glocality and intersectionality

Listerborn raises the criticism of politicizing gendered fear, as recent safety debates use it for introducing new urban renewal projects and turning it into a political instrument for various

stakeholders (Listerborn, 2016, p. 252). However, she continues, those stakeholders hold a limited view as focus lies on the experiences of white middle-class women leaving aside marginalized and unseen fears (ibid., p. 252). Listerborn calls for a radical equality shift to promote gender equality in public spaces for all non-hegemonic perspectives (ibid., p. 252): “[...] in which everyone is equal to everyone else at any time” (ibid., p. 258). Political visibility is hence connected to intersectional factors such as class and gender, determining the position of being an object or subject of politics (ibid., p. 261). Intersecting experiences of individuals have a greater impact than the simple addition of two factors- Crenshaw advocates shifting away from a single-axis framework to an intersectional one (1989, p. 139). This approach is pivotal to this project as it serves to analyze differences within the group of international students.

The concept of glocality contemplates the wider socio-spatial context for local occurrences: “A ‘glocal’ approach highlights the need to relate the global to the local scale and relating the everyday with the geopolitical context” (Listerborn, 2015, p. 4). Listerborn draws on Brenner’s concept of glocality, which he defines as the intertwining of global dynamics with local state structures. As Brenner explains, the term ‘glocal’ is intended to capture “[...] the increasingly dense superimposition and interpenetration of global political-economic forces and local-regional responses within the parameters of a single, re-scaled framework of state territorial organization” (Brenner, 1998, p. 16). He argues that with the intensification of globalization, state territorial power has not disappeared but has been rearranged and rearticulated across multiple spatial scales- an ongoing process he identifies as glocalization (ibid., p. 3). Listerborn uses this definition of glocality as she describes contemporary life as an interrelationship of local and global practices (2013, p. 291). In the context of growing globalization, national borders are becoming less central, while local spaces as sites of everyday life and identity formation, are gaining importance (ibid., p. 291). Leading an everyday global lifestyle means that crossing borders and maintaining contact with family and friends across the world has become increasingly easy, yet at the same time individuals continue to face local challenges such as cultural and linguistic barriers in their daily lives (ibid., p. 291). However, associating high-class people with being the most global and the least privileged people with being local shows a strong hierarchical order related to intersectional factors such as class and gender (ibid., p. 290). While the approach of glocality is not widespread in research, it is useful to analyze agency, body and borders from below to shed light on the power relations taking place on this level (Listerborn, 2013, p. 295). Especially in the Swedish context, the state seeks

to maintain control over local areas by drawing clear boundaries between neighborhoods, however this territorial logic clashes with the glocal everyday experiences of transnational migrants: “from the vast research on global cities and globalization on one hand, and the focus on the local and place identity on the other, there is now a growing interest in the dialectic interaction of these levels“ (ibid., p. 293). A further example from the Swedish context concerns migrant women who are embedded in global networks yet simultaneously marginalized within Swedish local networks. This often occurs through unemployment, which places them in an unwanted dependency on Swedish social support systems and authorities (ibid., p. 304). These hybrid cultures in Sweden are- according to Listerborn- beneficial for the state as “they convey alternative ways to solve problems, they make societal weaknesses visible, they establish international contacts and networks for starting different businesses and they bring in knowledge of languages and other life experience”- however, they must not exclude women (ibid., p. 307) or other marginalized identities.

As Listerborn argues, leading an international lifestyle is often associated with cosmopolitanism, whereas living in a multicultural neighborhood is frequently linked to poor living conditions (ibid., p. 291). This contrast reveals the “[...] need for a conceptual framing which not only refers to migration, but also to the place-making that people initiate and engage in” (ibid., p. 291). The practice of a hybrid culture by migrants in glocal neighborhoods in Sweden needs to be acknowledged instead of seeing them as isolated due to not being integrated (ibid., p. 302). The concept of glocality serves to analyze the global practices of the international students with their local urban space.

Masculine identity and fear in public spaces

Hegemonic masculinity is a concept that derives its meaning from the existence of subordinate masculinities and from the subordination of women more broadly (Connell, 1987, p. 183). It operates within a patriarchal social order and depends on the overarching subjugation of women to male interests (ibid., p. 183). Importantly, hegemonic masculinity does not seek to eliminate other forms of masculinity but rather to position itself above them in a hierarchical gender order (ibid., p. 184). The concept is characterized by its association with heterosexuality: “The most important feature of contemporary hegemonic masculinity is that it is heterosexual, being closely connected to the institution of marriage; and a key form of subordinated masculinity is homosexual” (ibid., p. 185). Connell further notes that “the public face of hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily what powerful men are, but what sustains their power and what large numbers of men are motivated to support. The notion of ‘hegemony’ generally implies a

large measure of consent“ (ibid., p. 184)- showing that the underlying structures that legitimize this concept are of utmost interest here. He also emphasizes that men in general benefit from women’s subordination- not necessarily through overtly discriminatory attitudes, but because women may be more accustomed to hegemonic masculine behavior and perceive it as more manageable than behavior associated with non-hegemonic masculinities (ibid., p. 185).

Connecting the concept of hegemonic masculinity to fear in public spaces, Day et al. show that “control, competition, aggression, and physical strength [...]” (2003, p. 312) are understood as masculine traits that directly shape how men perceive fear. For instance, men tend to fear unfamiliar spaces that challenge these masculine norms (ibid., p. 314), which creates a need for constant awareness in public space- essentially a continuous reassurance of being in control (ibid., p. 316). Men might therefore restrict their behavior in public space to areas where they feel safe and in control, as “[...] situations that challenge this gender identity may generate fear” (ibid., p. 320). Building on this male narrative, Keel and Lee (2025) highlight that men often perceive themselves as protectors (p. 924), even feeling responsible for this role and therefore less vulnerable than women (p. 926). However, the scholars point to a paradox: “the male protector role extended beyond normative heterosexual family structures [...]. So somewhat ironically, it was men who perceived women’s risk to be connected to the threat of sexual assault, not women’s own perceptions” (ibid., p. 926). The performance of masculine identity is strongly tied to heterosexuality, but also to homosexuality, shaping situations in which men experience fear and risk on behalf of others rather than themselves (ibid., p. 932). This represents a nuanced departure from the traditionally outlined model of hegemonic masculinity.

This perspective is relevant for my analysis, because it provides a theoretical framework that deepens the understanding of male perceptions of fear and safety in public space. The existing body of research offers extensive insight into how women experience and manage fear in public space, however there is comparatively limited research about what men fear- or about the normalization of “not fearing” as part of masculine identity. This gap is striking given that men are statistically more likely than women to be victims of crimes committed in public space (Day et al., 2003, p. 311). To address this paradox, the thesis examines the gender dimension by focusing on the male narrative of fear and exploring how norms of heteronormative masculinity shape men’s perceptions of safety, rather than beginning from the more commonly studied framework of female fear.

Finally, the concept of glocality, intersectionality and the masculine narrative are employed as interpretive lenses for examining how students make sense of fear and safety, whereas Young's ideal of city life functions as a more abstract concept, that I later use to evaluate how the empirical findings align with or question visions of an inclusive urban environment.

Method & Ethics

In this section, I first introduce the research method and outline its advantages in relation to this project, before describing the process of recruiting participants and explaining how the interviews were conducted. I then conclude with a brief discussion of the analysis procedure and the ethical considerations.

Walk-along Interview

For collecting the data in my Master thesis, I employed walk-along interviews as they present a hybrid version of traditional interviews and an ethnographic approach aimed at researching the relationship between the physical environment and the participant's perception of it (Kusenbach, 2003, p. 463). I focused on Lund, as the city has a high percentage of international students and at the same time research about this particular group is scarce (Cheung & Ryoo, 2021, p. 2). Walk-along interviews belong to qualitative research methods and open up the opportunity to research the relation of participants' individual perceptions and their spatial surroundings (Amaya et al., 2024, p. 18). Researchers are conducting interviews on walk-alongs in the neighborhoods and everyday surroundings of their participants (Carpiano, 2009, p. 264) and hence the researchers get actively involved in their participants' daily world (Bibi & Ehgartner, 2021, p. 2), which is precisely matching the aim of this research project focusing on the relationship of individual perception and spatial surroundings. Go-along interviews serve to reveal less evident topics in the research process (ibid., p. 3) and especially letting the interviewees decide the route leads to a less pressured environment of the interview- opening up the space for new, unanticipated topics (ibid., p. 4). Further, it helps to identify the interrelationship of intersectional factors of the participant and how that impacts their perceptions of their surroundings, which is especially relevant in my project as I am interested in different intersectional experiences (ibid., p. 3). Margarethe Kusenbach argues that "[...] the innovative method of the go-along [...] is a tool particularly suited to explore two key aspects of everyday lived experience: the constitutive role and the transcendent meaning of the physical environment" (Kusenbach, 2003, p. 458).

A merely ethnographic approach in terms of observation presents the difficulty of failing to grasp the depth and interpretation of certain actions (ibid., p. 459). Relying on the researchers' perceptions makes it also likely to take these as a starting point and hence present a researcher bias in terms of his or her interests and knowledge (ibid., p. 461). As I wanted to learn about the individual life trajectories and perceptions of their surroundings, I ruled out ethnographic observations as my research method.

On the other hand, sit-down interviews have a strong formal and static character as they take out the participants of their natural environment- making it more difficult to understand what they are talking about (ibid., p. 459). Participants in traditional interviews also might overlook facts they do not regard as important enough or are not willing to share certain experiences (ibid., p. 462). While I initially considered using a traditional interview approach, I ultimately decided against it, as the focus of this thesis lies on the physical environment, so participants would have needed to bring images of cities to the interview. Even then, it would have remained challenging to fully grasp their experiences and to situate their reflections within the environments they were describing.

Although ethnography is often praised for its "naturalness" (ibid., p. 461) and sit-down interviews serve to go beyond the observable (ibid., p. 462), Kusenbach nevertheless points out that walk-along interviews present a combination of the traditional interview form and a purely observational approach by serving to understand what role 'place' has in the daily routines (ibid., p. 463). Through active engagement by the researcher on the go-along interviews he or she can understand the perceptions and experiences of the participant with the physical and social environment- a more goal-oriented version of ethnographic observation (ibid., p. 463). Kusenbach ultimately identifies five different advantages of the method: first they serve to research the different perceptions of the participants and the spatial surroundings, which leads to a re-focus from the researcher's perspective and the removing of potential bias (ibid., p. 469). Second, the varying degrees of spatial engagement are being uncovered (ibid., p. 469), as well as the interaction of biographical elements of the participants, such as memories with the spatial surroundings (ibid., p. 474). Fourth, interviewees will most likely connect places with social connections and therefore help to understand the social architecture of a place (ibid., p. 475). Finally, go-alongs serve to understand social realms by researching "[...] the autonomy of place in shaping social interaction" (ibid., p. 476). The motivations outlined above informed my decision to use walk-along interviews, as this method allows me to focus on how participants interact with their physical surroundings while simultaneously connecting these observations

to their personal backgrounds and intersectional experiences, without allowing my own interests to influence the process.

Access to participants & interview process

I initially aimed to conduct approximately ten interviews and ultimately completed nine. Four of them were with female international students and five with male students and all of them had roughly lived for two years in Sweden. The age span of the participants ranged from 22 to 25 and approximately all were currently in their last semester of master studies with one participant having recently completed her studies. Countries of origin were China, Spain, Russia, the Netherlands, Germany, France/Japan, Poland and India and the interviews were conducted in English. To begin the recruitment process, I contacted the administrators of two Facebook groups for international students in Lund and posted a message describing my thesis and the search for participants. This approach generated only one response, from a female student who recognized my name from a previous encounter. Due to the limited engagement, I simultaneously initiated a snowball sampling strategy by reaching out to former classmates and acquaintances and asking whether they knew international students who might be willing to participate. This method proved effective and eight of the nine participants were recruited through this snowball approach.

Turning to the interview process it became clear that the participants were really interested in the topic and engaged- as seen from this quote by Nils: “I’m gonna keep talking- you’re never gonna get away from this interview!”. All participants were asked to suggest a meeting place they considered meaningful or interesting and in cases where they did not have a preference, I proposed a suitable location. Interview places¹ included the following ones: Kunskapsparken, Lund C and surrounding, Stadsparken, Sankt Hans Hill, the botanical garden and the area around BMC Biomedicinskt centrum. The chosen locations proved very suitable for the walk-along interviews, as each site offered a concrete point of departure that shaped and benefitted the dialogue. For instance, the interview with Klara in Kunskapsparken took place in a quiet, nature-oriented environment, closely mirroring her own definition of safety, as discussed later. Parks such as Stadsparken and the Botanical Garden- frequently mentioned by women as potentially unsafe- provided an ideal setting to discuss design elements like greenery, lighting and visibility. Paul, who emphasized the importance of commercial areas for feeling safe, noted their absence at our interview site at Sankt Hans Hill, which opened an interesting

¹See Map of the walk-along interview in the appendix

conversation about urban design and perceived security. Finally, the residential areas around BMC and on the eastern side of Lund C offered a relevant context for discussing the experience of coming home at night in the neighborhoods where participants actually lived. Interviews lasted from around 20 min up to an hour- depending on the participant and how much she or he wanted to share. Although the interviews were semi-structured², I allowed the conversation to follow the topics introduced by the participants. Such individual themes were for instance true crime podcasts, martial arts influence, travel experience and public transportation in relation to safety. I also concluded each interview by inviting final reflections or questions, giving participants the opportunity to share anything that came to mind. This often prompted more personal connections and additional themes to emerge, as also noted by Bibi and Ehgartner (2021, p. 5).

Topic-wise, the interviews began with a brief introduction to participants' cultural backgrounds and identities, followed by their personal perceptions of Lund's urban design. I then moved to questions about their upbringing, focusing on how safety was understood or taught during childhood and adolescence, before approaching their current understanding of safety. The final major theme concerned the gender dimension in relation to their backgrounds. At the end of each interview, I asked participants to describe an imagined city district/element in which they would feel particularly safe or unsafe and then offered space for any additional thoughts or questions.

During the walk-along itself, I used elements of the physical environment as prompts to discuss design features and participants' emotional responses to specific spatial elements. Examples include the greenery in the park where the interview was conducted, the atmosphere around Lund C, the street lighting, the layout of the streets and the architecture of the surrounding houses. This proved especially helpful for participants who initially struggled to think of concrete examples- once we engaged with the surroundings directly, their reflections became more detailed and spontaneous, demonstrating the potential of walk-along methods.

Analytical process

The analytical process began with identifying recurring themes across the participants' interviews, which I then continued to examine in greater depth. To organize the material, I created mind-maps to gain an overview and identify relationships between the emerging topics. After mapping these connections, I listed the relevant empirical material for each theme and

²See Interview-guide in the appendix

worked out the different arguments expressed by the interviewees. I remained closely involved with the empirical material and once the main thematic groups had been established, I began to structure my arguments and connect them to the relevant theoretical frameworks. The analysis attempts to establish a clear red thread across the subtopics, however, findings related to the gender dimension frequently overlapped with other themes, particularly participants' upbringing.

Ethical considerations

After the interviews were completed, all recordings were transcribed afterwards. Prior to each interview, participants signed a consent form confirming their agreement to be recorded and acknowledging that anonymized excerpts from their transcripts could be used in the study. All participants have been anonymized, only their gender and place of origin are retained, as this is analytically relevant. Audio files and transcripts are securely stored. During the interviews, I emphasized that participants should avoid sharing sensitive personal experiences as the walk-along method takes place in public space and carries the risk of encountering people they know- thus maintaining the confidentiality of the interviewee was of utmost priority (Clark & Emmel, 2010, p. 5). I emphasized that they were free to share only what they felt comfortable discussing. Finally, my own position as an international student may have influenced both the interview dynamics and the interpretation of participants' narratives, particularly since, as a woman, I could strongly identify with the female participants in this study.

Analysis

In the following sub chapters the data from the nine walk-along interviews conducted in Lund will be thematically presented in relation to the outlined concepts of glocality, intersectionality and the theory of the ideal city life.

Gendered dimensions

The perceived relationship between architectural elements and safety in Lund, as well as the precautionary and protective strategies described by the international students interviewed, will be interpreted in the final subchapter in relation to the gender dimension.

Urban design in relation to perceived safety in Lund

Before analyzing the specific architectural features mentioned in the interviews, it is relevant to outline safety as an individual concept, as it is shaped by subjective perceptions. Klara for instance equates calmness and nothingness with presence of safety, which she compares to the

surroundings of our interview in Kunskapsparken. With only water and nature around us, limited light and only the wind as a noise, she explains:

I would say not-noises. For example, now it's only the wind [here] and there's no one else [...]. This [creates] also a safe place, because people that they want to [...] harm [others]- I think they don't go [...] somewhere [where it's] nothing. So, I would say this: it's a peaceful place [here], because it's kind of noisy, water [is] clean, yeah... And I would say the woods are often a safe place, I guess. People just go there to enjoy it. (Klara, Spanish origin).

While Klara prefers quietness and emptiness, Noah defines safety as:

In the core it's being unbothered. Because if there's no person or situation that leads [...] to a situation where I would feel unsafe, it's just presence of safety [...]. (Noah, German origin)

Highlighting that his feeling of safety is connected to people keeping to themselves. Nils on the other hand connects being safe with knowing his spatial surroundings:

I guess that really depends on where I am. But often I do feel quite safe, as long as I know where I am and I know what type of place it is. (Nils, French-Japanese origin).

Keeping the subjective understanding of safety in mind, participants were largely coherent in listing certain urban design characteristics that made Lund feel safe for them, such as the small size (Paul, Miriam, Noah), wide streets (Klara, Johanna, Noah), the old charm flair of the city (Miriam, Johanna, Noah, Maurice), green areas (Klara) as well as commercial (Paul, Maurice) and residential areas (Leah) which is largely coherent with the data found in previous research (Limaki, 2024, p. 5). However, while most of the students mentioned lightning as a positive factor (Klara & Johanna), Noah goes into detail and points out that the warm street lightning does create a cozy atmosphere, however, it also has the potential of feeling unsafe:

What the street lighting at the streets does- it's this very warm yellowish, rather dark lighting. So, when there's no one around, that's completely fine. I would even say that's more cozy then. But I do see, although I've myself experienced only once or twice, that this very dark general situation could lead to feeling of unease. (Noah, German origin)

He still prefers this light over “bright, cold surgical light” and overall has a safe feeling in Lund. Felix contradicts Noah as he feels there is not enough lightning in Lund- especially in Stadsparken where our interview took place- which actually creates dark areas and uncertainty:

I think, for example, there's not so much light. I mean, here they are more relying, I think, on the actual lamps and windows. But yeah, I think that there is not so much light. Also, if there are lamps, I don't think they're like giving so much light exposure. Yeah, they are not shining that brightly. So sometimes in the night it's dark or sometimes there's like spots, dark spots. So that's a little scary, when you are coming home from a party or something“. (Felix, Polish origin)

Research suggests that brighter light leads to people having less fear of being outside at night (Chalfin & Kaplan, 2021, p.717), supporting Felix’s point of view.

Further when it comes to urban design and safety, Nils chooses big roads over park areas, where Klara connects the existence of streets with the possibility of being abducted:

I was also thinking of areas where only people can walk. Because when there are like roads or something, then it feels less safe- you can just come there with a car or whatever. (Klara, Spanish origin).

This shows a different perception on what men and women fear as crime, as men are usually more targeted by physical assault and women are fearing sexual attacks (Konrad & Reid, 2004, p. 400) and feeling more vulnerable compared to men (Valentine, 1989, p. 385).

As a unique feature of the city design in Lund, Miriam points to the windows of the houses in the residential areas of Lund C, where she sees a cat in the window sitting during our interview. All the houses we pass have well-kept gardens and almost every window is uncovered with curtains drawn open. She explains that transparent doors and big windows mean safety and familiarity for her:

It's so transparent and visual, they don't have anything to hide. I think that is also connected to the safety and security, because I feel like I know these people. They don't pose danger, because I can see first of all from outside of their houses and just like everything, that's behind their door. Which is creepy for them? Good for me, I guess. (Miriam, Russian origin)

Studies show that transparency is especially relevant in urban design as it “[...] bring[s] more people (eyes on the street) [and] long sightlines [...]” (Aly et al., 2023, p. 751), which supports Miriam’s feeling of safety stemming from transparency.

Turning to design elements that create an uncertain feelings for the participants, elements such as graffiti (Leah & Maurice) get mentioned, as well as tunnels and the potential fear of gang violence (Nils), Stadsparken at night (Noah), abandoned buildings possibly related to the drug scene (Felix & Maurice), “poorer” looking areas in general (Maurice), Lund C (Klara & Johanna), liminal spaces (Noah) and under passings (Noah). Finally, Paul points out that dark areas/rooms present uncertainty for him, but the feeling of unease is more expressed towards encountering unwanted animals than crime:

The laundry below the first floor is a bit dark and sometimes white and has some strange smell. [...] I guess it's okay for me- I don't worry about too much about that.

And:

I am sometimes a bit scared of like spiders, but luckily, I don't think here's a lot of spiders [here]. Spiders or snakes? It's sometimes a bit terrifying, but it's okay.
(Paul, Chinese, background)

This is also coherent with Felix’s point of view, who is afraid of encountering rats and mice in Stadsparken. A topic that nevertheless does not emerge among the female participants, pointing to different safety priorities.

A common theme mentioned across the international students was the feeling of belonging to a community and having a good neighborhood:

I think about a place where there are people around. So, I mean, I think that there's the whole idea of what like collectives [are] and the neighbors and they check up. (Nils, French-Japanese origin)

Nevertheless, opinions differ when asking about the perceptions of fellow students, especially when encountered drunk at night. While some regard them as peers and not an issue (Felix, Leah & Maurice):

Even though there are still some drunk teenagers, but I know they are the peers.
(Paul, Chinese origin),

Klara feels unsafe at the center at night due to drunk students. While also Noah is not afraid of them, he would still not regard them as peers and likewise Johanna agrees more with Klara's opinion:

[If] they are going out and you don't know what kind of types of behaviors are coming with being drunk, it might make you feel less at ease just because people can react weirdly to alcohol or any other substances. (Johanna, Dutch origin)

While Klara and Johanna are more unsure about drunk students as well as Nils and Noah, the other students do not perceive them as a safety issue, showing that gender might not play a driving role in this perception. Klara further points out that a feeling of belonging and community fosters the feeling of safety, but also notices that a high mobility of people moving in and out of apartments can create a feeling of temporality. This can be understood against the backdrop of scholars citing that an undesirable social environment actually directly produces a feeling of unsafety (Dong et al., 2023, p. 4) and Ceccato and Yate's theory of connecting the feeling of safety to a high level of any sort of migration in a neighborhood (2020, p. 281).

What got further pointed out as a positive aspect of Lund is the gender inclusivity expressed in street signs:

I think I'll say it's very inclusive, like from my point of view there are always for all gender toilets and for people with physical disabilities, who are sitting in a wheelchair- there's always the fact that they're very included and very visible- it makes them a bigger part of the daily life. (Maurice, German origin)

And also Noah raises that point:

Also here in Lund [what] went out to me is that the iconography about the pedestrian street walks signs. They alternate 50/50 between male and women icons on the signs. And that's like the smallest things that I think you don't really consciously notice every day. But I guess you do notice- it's still subconsciously maybe. So, I think that's just reasonable here. (Noah, German origin)

This shows that visual inclusivity actually contributes to a safety feeling for all participants in society (Escalante & Valdivia, 2015, p. 122).

While most of the interviewed students regard Lund as “pretty safe” with a few areas that make them feel uncertain such as Stadsparken, Lund C and the botanical garden, it becomes evident that gender plays a strong role in this, as one male participant states:

[...] most of the time I don't worry about darkness or signal of the phone, because I'm a man and I don't worry about [that] too much. (Paul, Chinese origin)

While the impact of gender will be analyzed in the next two subchapters more in depth, the gendered gap in fear perception is fairly evident and coherent with recent research pointing out the higher level of fear of women compared to men at night (Kregert, 2024, p. 5).

Precaution & protection strategies

Fear itself is not a gendered phenomenon, but a state that every individual can encounter to a different extent (Ceccato & Yates, 2020, p. 282). This became evident when analyzing the interviews and both male and female students explained certain strategies they are employing when being out at night. For instance, Nils and Miriam named lowering the volume of their music or choosing not to listen to it at all as well as engaging in self-defense/martial arts to gain a certain level of confidence (Felix & Miriam).

Nevertheless, the performance of male identity in relation to employing precaution strategies becomes evident. Paul for instance only shares occasionally his location when he does solo travelling and does not care about precaution strategies, as he is used to relying on camera surveillance:

I don't care much about that. Because I guess most of [the] time in China, because we have [surveillance] yeah, to monitor everywhere. (Paul, Chinese origin)

And when asked about safety strategies such as sharing his location, Maurice states:

Actually, I've never thought about sharing my location. Probably like... I don't know- when I'm like traveling through eastern or like southern American countries, then I would probably think about it, but you know, that's kind of...yeah, not here. Not here and never. (Maurice, German origin)

Having no or limited safety strategies can be attributed to the construction of male identity where they downplay their personal risk in relation to the perceived risk of women (Keel & Lee, 2025, p. 931) and being seen as the less vulnerable protector of “defenseless” women (ibid., p. 926). Further, those few strategies named by male interviewees show the longing for

needing to stay in control, such as Nils who defines safety as always having to know where he is and Noah stating:

The only thing that's important to me is that I myself am conscious. So, if I'm too drunk, I just want to be able to act- to have agency and that is the only thing I really need. (Noah, German origin)

Also, Felix agrees:

Yeah, I mean when I walk, I like observe people that are passing me. (Felix, Polish origin)

Research suggests that a specific male fear is the unfamiliarity with spatial surroundings (Day et al., 2003, p. 314) as “[...] inadequate understanding of the environment produces distress and feelings of loss of control” (ibid., p. 316). Hence, the dominating narrative of the male students interviewed is maintaining control, a characteristic trait that can be seen as a result of hegemonic masculinism (ibid., p. 317).

Following from this trajectory emerges the male narrative establishing men as the female protector. As just outlined all the male students had little to no safety strategies, but are very aware of their female counterparts:

I think I have two ways of looking at that one: through female friends, who regularly call or share their location. Or the very typical have the key in your hand stories. Even like one of my roommates- just to go to the laundry room which is like 200 meters. The other day she called her boyfriend, she would be like scared for her life. (Noah, German origin)

But of course, for example, if I'm sitting at home and my girlfriend is walking through Stadsparken, and she's like walking her way home, then I would be nervous and if she texts me like “I'm at a friend's house- I see you in like two hours” and then if it's like not two hours, but like 2:30 then I would be like “hmm shit”, especially in the evenings I would be like “hmm I should maybe check on her and see’. (Maurice, German origin)

Their perception of risk is thus highly gendered with a heightened attention towards female vulnerability (Keel & Lee, 2025, p. 931).

The strategies employed by the female students can be seen against the backdrop of Valentine's spatial expression of patriarchy (1989, p. 389). Strategies listed were sharing always their location when going out at night (Klara, Johanna & Leah), turning music down (Miriam), crossing the street at night when someone is on the same side (Miriam) and also clothing plays a pivotal role:

Yeah, I would say it's scarier as a woman and I do always try to bring like long jackets or something. I can hide my hair or something so we cannot detect really fast I'm a woman. Yeah, I think we feel also more scared, because of what they can do with us or like what they do with the raping and so on yeah- I'm always more scared if I bring also like high heels- so I think it's a big issue. (Klara, Spanish origin)

This not only shows a different point of view than from the male students, but also underlines the aforementioned female vulnerability. By relying on male protection such as from male friends or boyfriends, the male subsystem of patriarchy becomes further fostered: "Consequently this cycle of fear becomes one subsystem by which male dominance, patriarchy, is maintained and perpetuated. Women's inhibited use and occupation of public space is therefore a spatial expression of patriarchy" (Valentine, 1989, p. 389). Important to mention here although is, that none of the female students interviewed actually limited their time outside at night and that they in total have a "pretty safe" feeling in Lund (Klara, Miriam, Johanna & Leah). However, as noted above, the female students still employed more safety strategies than the male students. These strategies can also be understood through the lens of glocality, as the women actively manage their safety in a new country by drawing on global support networks- for example, sharing their live location with family members who are often not even in the same country. This illustrates their capacity not only to organize their everyday life in an unfamiliar national context, but also to apply global practices within local settings (Listerborn, 2013, p. 306).

Ultimately, the male students highlighted the narrative as defender and being less vulnerable than woman. This can be inferred from following statements:

Actually, I'm always wondering, or that's always a very, very bad situation for me, because I know that I might be like a personal threat, for example [...]. I'm always kind of a bit unsure what to do. Sometimes I would just like to, I don't know, say, "don't worry, I'm not a threat", but that's kind of not it, you know? So,

I have strategies to avoid that, because sometimes I'm reducing speed, like going on the other side, leave some space or maybe also taking another way home to not stress this person. I also sometimes call someone, because then I think it is a bit more a chilled situation for the woman in front of me, because then it's a more like- I don't know if it makes her more comfortable- but I would think that "okay this person is like calling someone and it's talking about this person about whatever, I don't know last Sunday," and that would make me feel a bit more chilled. Yeah, but these are only strategies to avoid something, that is so true and dangerous. And I think these strategies are only like water drops in a very very big ocean of problems. But yes, I'm thinking about my personal impact. I want to put it like this. But then that's also the question, is that enough? I don't know. And also, like everyone, like does everyone feel the same, what helped one person could like, I don't know, fear another person? So, it's kind of, there's no kind of one size suits all solution for these kind of problems. (Maurice, German origin)

Similar to Maurice's experience, Nils reports likewise that he reflects about his impact at night in attempting to not cause any discomfort for women:

I think like a big worry for me is also being on the other side, when I'm out at night. And I'm just walking about and I'll see a woman and stuff. I'll try and I'll worry more about how I'm perceived. And so, I'll try and find ways to avoid trying to show that I'm a threat. Like because I want to make the other person feel comfortable. And so maybe I'll avoid- I'll go to the next sidewalk to try and like, you know, like I'll try and feel so far away and like kind of give you space and stuff and I'll try and if I'm walking in the same direction sometimes I've taken a wrong turn to try and create more distance and then I'll be like oh wait actually. (Nils, French-Japanese origin)

Both quotes show the strategies of male students at night in terms of mitigating women's fear and this suggests that the men position themselves more as defenders (Keel & Lee, 2025, p. 919), which implicitly constructs women as more vulnerable or in need of protection (ibid., p. 926). This downplaying of their own risk is yet again closely tied to the construction of male identity (ibid., p. 931). Precisely this performance of masculine identities through gendered norms might even be the very reason in the first place that masks sexual harassment as an

invisible problem in society (ibid., p. 931) even though such protective stance may appear helpful at first glance.

Gendered fear

When asked whether they believe gender influences perceptions of fear, the interview participants offered largely consistent responses. Miriam, for example, describes the experiences of two men in her life- including her boyfriend, who does not feel afraid even in remote places or when being outside at night:

Whenever he went out- like goes out anywhere, he doesn't feel like this- the difference between going out when it's light outside and it's dark outside. No, he's like "no I never like feel like danger" and this man- he's not like six five, he's not like the soul yeah strong man. He just doesn't feel like this. (Miriam, Russian origin)

For her there is a clear difference in how men and women perceive risk and safety- women are more aware of potential risk, while men are confident enough to not be afraid. Maurice likewise acknowledges a clear gender difference. He explains that he himself does not feel afraid in public space and is often not even aware that others might be- unless they explicitly mention it. At the same time, he has become more sensitized to the topic through his female friends and notes that he does experience fear on behalf of his girlfriend when she is out at night:

[...] when I'm with [...] female friends then they sometimes tell me like "okay I would have never been here like without you" or for example, if there are situations where, I don't know, strangers encounter them, then they were like, "ah, it was good that I was not alone" and "it was good that, yeah, I was in a group." And that's very, very sad. (Maurice, German origin)

This can be related to the aforementioned prevalent masculine identity narrative of men being the protector of the women in their life and perceiving themselves as less vulnerable (Keel & Lee, 2025, p. 932). Maurice goes on to explain that violence against women in public spaces is a widespread problem that cannot be solved solely through changes in urban design and that men in general are not sufficiently aware of the issue:

I mean, I'm the best example for the problem [as] for half of the population -all the main people- it's not a bit deal. Yes, we think about that occasionally, if someone asks us, or if we are closely related to a person who might be affected,

or who might experience violence, and yeah, that's the problem. (Maurice, German origin)

Noah and Nils likewise refer to their female friends, from whom they have come to understand a different level of fear. Nils, for example, explains this contrast through his habit of going for late-night runs:

[...] I don't truly understand the full experience of how it is to go out on your own as a woman. And I think there's a lot of things that women do differently, [...] I think safety is maybe a bit more a priority, because it is a lot more dangerous [for women]. I think I've noticed that [in the following] example, when I've talked about my habits as a guy- for example last year- I'd go out running quite a bit. And I mentioned to one of my women friends that I'll just go out at 1 a.m. sometimes and just go and run. Because that's the time that I found for me was [perfect]- it's nighttime. I like running at night. It brings me a certain peace knowing that there isn't anybody. I mean, I'll still be freaked out if there is somebody. But if there is somebody, again, my mentality was I'll just run fast, I'll just get home as soon as possible. But then it's still something that I did. But then obviously [when] talking about it to a friend of mine, she was like, oh that's kind of crazy. And so, it's like things that I think work maybe (differently) if I was a woman- I'd think about it a way more. (Nils, French-Japanese origin)

However, as the only research participant Felix goes in another direction, by defining fear as a general attribute, which is not inherently gendered and he is reluctant to make generalizations:

I think it's not a matter of a gender, but just a person. Because both, I think like a woman and a man can feel the same. Okay, maybe not very the same, but similar kind of reaction. I mean, probably I would say, but I don't want to generalize. But I mean, men maybe can be less emotional to some things than women- I think they're more emotional and they- I don't want to generalize and say that there's two different people, because we are all the same, but I feel that if there will be something, then a woman [will] actually handle that a little differently. (Felix, Polish origin)

This goes more in the direction of the statement Ceccato and Yates make: “Fear should not be understood as an enduring, fixed trait that is inherently gendered but rather a phenomenon that every individual can experience to a varying degree at different points in their life“ (2020, p.

282). While Felix acknowledges that there may be gendered differences in how fear is managed, he prefers to focus on other external factors rather than generalizing this as a claim that applies to everyone.

Johanna on the other hand feels pretty safe in Lund, but she nevertheless points out the problem of public violence in her home country, the Netherlands and connects this, likewise to Maurice, to broader societal structures rather than an urban design problem:

It's usually a more societal thing that men will see women as more of their own objects. So, it's like a big thing currently going on in the Netherlands about women's safety, not only in home, but also in public places and how we can improve that. (Johanna, Dutch origin)

Leah also avoids generalizing the situation in Lund, but she points out that in her country of origin, India, she would clearly identify a gender difference, as a very traditional societal order still prevails there.

Summarizing the prevailing understanding among the international student interviews is that overall women are more likely to feel at unease in Lund compared to men and that this can be connected to performance of masculine identities in establishing men as less fearful and women as more vulnerable and in need of protection (Keel & Lee, 2025, p. 931). While the male students expressed awareness of and actively called for greater attention to public violence against women, as for example Maurice did, their accounts simultaneously reveal a perceived status of being less at risk than their female counterparts. This in turn reinforces a system in which women are positioned as vulnerable to gendered attacks and consequently seek protection from men, illustrating the spatial expression of patriarchy (Valentine, 1989, p. 389). A dominant narrative in the data is therefore that male students feel responsible for women's safety, while also expressing a desire to maintain control over their surroundings in ways that avoid challenging traits that are associated with a hegemonic masculine narrative (Day et al., 2003, p. 314), such as physical strength and aggression (ibid., p. 312). While awareness towards their own safety was present, it mostly got mentioned in relation to female friends and family members. Especially for the female participants it becomes evident that their reliance on social support networks extends across national borders and the integration of these global support strategies into their local neighborhood context illustrates the glocalisation of international student life. This glocal perspective becomes particularly evident among the female students, as they share their live location with family members and friends abroad and vice versa,

relatives in their home countries request regular check-ins from them. Miriam's case for instance, with her mother checking in regularly, shows how everyday challenges in the new country of residence are managed through transnational safety strategies, illustrating what Listerborn (2012, p. 291) describes as the glocalisation of everyday life and a specific form of agency. In contrast, the male students did not report maintaining contact with family or friends abroad for safety-related reasons, emphasizing the particular importance of glocal strategies for female international students.

Influence of cultural background & childhood on safety perception

Researchers have shown that the expression and management of fear vary across cultural contexts (Brown, 2024, p. 1). Immigrants in particular might experience heightened fear, as language barriers and the process of adapting to a new culture can shape how they perceive and interpret potential threats (ibid., p. 1). As the "[...] cultural setting shapes one's reaction to the surrounding world [...]" (Bennett & Flavin, 1994, p. 363), it shows the relevance to examine how the participants in this study perceive Swedish culture in relation to their home countries. Notably, despite their varied cultural backgrounds, the students interviewed describe Swedish culture in quite similar terms. They perceive it as calm (Klara, Miriam), open and inclusive (Maurice, Noah) and helpful, while also emphasizing a tendency for people to keep to themselves:

So, what I've noticed here in the last one and a half years is, that people usually keep to their own business and they don't interfere with what you're doing, even if you're drunk. They don't usually come and start a conversation with you, unless they really have to, so I feel like even with drunk students around or late at night- anywhere it's really not a problem. (Leah, Indian origin)

And when asked about the perception of cultural differences to her home country Russia, Miriam states:

Huge, honestly. And that's probably the reason why I left it, because I think like culturally, Sweden is so calm. Like you don't get anxiety by just existing. I think that's especially in Lund, -maybe in Malmö [it's] a bit different, because it's also a bigger city- but in Lund, I think everyone is so silent, even on public transportation. You could not hear anyone. And in Moscow, you would hear not only everyone, but also some unpleasant words said towards you. It's a really different culture and people are very straightforward, while in Sweden I think

that's like the opposite. Yes, like people just don't do anything, actually. At least to your face. So, I would say that especially, again from Moscow, where like it's 20 million people living in one city and here it's like barely 100,000, like barely yeah. And it's mostly students. These are super different and I think that's the beauty of this. (Miriam, Russian origin)

Her quote directly links to the argument that the size of the city of origin influences their feeling of safety in Lund. The students who lived in bigger cities than Lund all reported that this directly related to a perceived feeling of familiarity, as Leah explains:

This city looks very aesthetic and so I come from a very [big] city and it's just so populated and there's too many people and too little space, so things kind of get cramped sometimes, but I don't see that happening here. (Leah, Indian origin)

However, Klara grew up in a smaller village near Barcelona and still perceives Lund as safer, referring to several unsettling encounters with young men during her adolescence. Likewise, Johanna, who comes from a remote and comparably small village in the Netherlands, describes her hometown as similarly safe to Lund. Felix, who grew up in a suburb of Gdansk, reports an equal sense of safety in both places and does not associate city size with safety, noting that “[...] I think both are okay.” These accounts suggest that familiarity with larger urban environments may make smaller cities feel more approachable and safer. This should not be understood as a general claim, but rather as the subjective experiences of the participants in this study.

Prior exposure to alcoholism and drug-related issues in the home country appears to shape how participants interpret similar phenomena in Sweden. Maurice reports feeling unsafe in Frankfurt because of the pervasive drug culture, a sentiment likewise supported by Noah, who notes:

But in Germany or in Wiesbaden [*name of the city*], then you have definitely more young people, [drunk] people running around and not only being drunk, but being drunk and sometimes aggressive. (Maurice, German origin)

However, while Paul also reports feeling uneasy around drunk people, he is accustomed to extensive camera surveillance in his home country, China, which contributes to a sense of security in Sweden as well. As he explains:

Most of time in China, we have the video [surveillance], to monitor everywhere. So even though when I loose my bag or someone steals something- when I call the place, they will check the video and know who stole it. (Paul, Chinese origin)

This illustrates how culturally shaped experiences in the home country influence participants' awareness of similar behaviors in the new context.

Similarly, participants who experienced greater unease in their home countries report that this enhances their sense of safety in Lund. Miriam, for instance, recalls repeated experiences of insecurity in Moscow and feels much more comfortable in Lund:

I don't feel maybe as [much] at danger as I felt in Moscow, when there are a lot of people, but no one cares. I know in [Sweden], it's like someone got attacked, so I don't know [if] someone [would] help me, but I know for a fact that in Russia no one would help you. I witnessed some things, like even as a child and I think in this way I just don't feel like at danger [here]. (Miriam, Russian origin)

Similar to this, Klara states that she has become “street-smart” in Barcelona, which helps her living in Sweden:

I feel like it really helped me to be from Barcelona, because we have many pickpockets [...]. So, I think this has made me smarter on the street, like street smart, because I can detect some triggers for that. (Klara, Spanish origin)

Which directly has influenced her cultural behavior in Lund:

In Barcelona, I learned how to scan people, so I can really see when someone looks too still, at pockets and so on. They start looking at you and so on. In Sweden in general, they don't do eye contact. So, when they start making eye contact, they want something. And that could be good or bad. So yeah, there are some signs you need to read. And especially about what you said, the Swedish culture, when you know how they are in the street, then you can see which are the ones that want to harm you. (Klara, Spanish origin)

Leah describes her hometown in India as a place where it was highly unsafe, especially for women, to be outside at night or to rely on public transportation. Upon arriving in Lund, she notes that it took time to adapt to the comparatively safer surroundings, as such conditions were unfamiliar to her:

And maybe at first I was a little scared to go out alone in the dark, late at night, but then you walk around the city- you see how people are and then you get used to the fact that people are nice people just minding their own business- they don't

care about what you do as long as you're not in their way and that gives you a feeling of safety kind of and people are also a little helpful. (Leah, Indian origin)

Conversely, being raised in a “safe” environment does not imply diminished situational awareness. Instead, it may contribute to a heightened sense of serenity and trust in one’s surroundings. Nils reports that he was always a more scared person when growing up, but having attended school in Japan helped him as it was safer than living in France later on:

I was always kind of scared to do anything on my own. And it was more my mom who encouraged me to kind of like go to school on my own, for example. And she was like, you have to learn to kind of go to school on your own and I would be like, no, I don't want to go to school. But like she really tried to push for that. And I think it does help that I was at that point in my life in Japan. And so not only was it possible for me to go to school on my own, because I could take the bike to school [...], but also, Japan is like really quite safe in that regard. I mean kids go to school on their own like all the time, kids are out and about on their own like hanging out in parks and stuff on their own and like for the most part, it's really safe- I mean it did take a while for me to start doing stuff on my own, but I think my parents were kind of more like a go do it type yeah. (Nils, French-Japanese origin)

And Johanna reporting an equal safety feeling growing up in a small town in the Netherlands:

And then mostly like on my way, it's very well lit. And usually in the night, no one would really bike or drive there. So, then you start making up big scenarios, but overall, I never had a problem with safety. (Johanna, Dutch origin)

Finally, a notable trend appears among several male participants who describe growing up with female relatives who were particularly vigilant about safety in public places. Such experiences seem to have informed their perception that women may be more vulnerable to certain risks. Noah, for instance, explains that his mother was repeatedly pickpocketed on public transport in France, which he attributes to her being “quite small- so they might think, okay, let's target her.” Maurice similarly recalls his mother “[...] refusing to go to the train station when it's past ten.”

This pattern is also evident in Miriam’s account, who describes growing up with a heightened expectation to monitor her safety- an expectation not extended to her male relatives. She recounts:

I have a cousin, about my age, he is male. And first of all, no one ever cared where he went. So, like he's from my aunt, [...] but she's super anxious generally. But she never asked about him and she still asks about me being here. She's like "she's a woman". It's different. And for him, he could just go out. Then he returned, actually beaten sometimes. But no one assumed that [he] could get killed somewhere. And then if I don't reply, my mom is like 10 minutes later, already calling the police or something- almost like this, because it's super, super different. And exactly because not all men, but some men. (Miriam, Russian origin)

In summary, cultural background plays a significant role in shaping how participants perceive safety in Lund. Those who originate from environments they consider less safe- often larger cities- tend to display heightened awareness in Sweden, while also recognizing the contrast of living in a calmer and more predictable setting. Participants from relatively safe home environments also show attentiveness to safety, yet they articulate this awareness with more serenity and less heightened vigilance. Their perceptions are further shaped by specific factors such as visible alcohol and drug use or the presence of surveillance systems. Importantly, childhood experiences of safety, especially those structured along gendered expectations, continue to influence what participants attend to in public space today.

Influence by the media & news

As part of the broader discussion on global practices operating within local contexts, the study also explored how international students engage with media and news.

While there has been one participant stating that he considers himself ignorant as he does not follow the news in Sweden:

I don't necessarily read local media that much. So, I don't know what's going on all the time. So, in that respect I'm very ignorant. (Nils, French-Japanese origin),

most of the students try to stay informed about events and occurrences in Sweden and their home country. However, before diving deeper into that, it becomes apparent that the character of the news reporting in the home country shapes at least some of the students' habits of following the news in Sweden. Felix for instance says:

Because also I got really tired from media [in my country] [Poland]. Because the level of journalism there is just, I think, bad. And there's [a lot of] click bait. So, I don't really like that. (Felix, Polish origin)

While the type of news reports can have an impact on how the student perceives and uses Swedish media, the content regarding crime in the home country likewise plays a role. Leah for instance says that she is still very much influenced by the news about crime against women in India and that news reporting played an active role in shaping that:

[...] In other parts of India, you have that fear instilled in you, because you read those kind of news in the newspaper or your parents read that and they don't want you to go outside alone. So, I think it's something that you just accept, that that's how it is. And you don't want to try and venture into it to see if that's actually a fact or not. (Leah, Indian origin)

While most of the students try to catch at least big events happening in Sweden, for instance Noah, most of them stay informed about the news in their home country and actively stay in touch with family and friends. Miriam for example explains the following:

I would say, that like generally, I'm hyper aware of Social media in terms of I follow a lot of news- yeah, because I have notifications [turned on]. I think now [there is] actually- at least in my group- is a trend of going away from social media, because that's too much. But I feel that's for weak-sensitive people and I'm like- if I'm not aware of what's happening around me, I'm actually more at danger, because if the World War 3 is started by my country actually, I would be the first one to know. And I would feel aware and I think that's what I'm going with- [...] when it happened [at] Lund C or like in different places, because I also followed Swedish news. So, I would say that maybe I'm not influenced as much as in terms of trends, yes, but in terms of news and normally what's happening. I think it also affects me quite a lot and again, back in Russia, there I still follow a lot of Russian news. So, I also send my mom when something bad is happening in my region “Don’t go out”. (Miriam, Russian origin)

This illustrates the paradox of migration: while crossing borders, migrants continue to maintain ties to their countries of origin and these transnational connections remain central to their identity (Listerborn, 2013, p.291). Moreover, these local-global relations reflect what

Listerborn describes as “[...] ‘transnationalism from below’ [...] functioning at the level of the neighborhood, that is, global life cannot be separated from everyday lives” (ibid., p. 292).

A further theme that emerged in the interviews was the role of true crime in shaping students’ feelings of safety. Several participants described experiencing unease when visiting places, they had previously encountered in true-crime narratives. Notably, all of these students were female. This aligns with research showing that media portrayals of crime tend to influence women’s fear more strongly than men’s, as Dowler (2003) notes, media effects on fear are “[...] strongest for females [...]” (p. 110). Klara, for instance, explains:

I went where the second minister of Sweden was killed of something. And I felt a bit like, oh,, is it going to happen to me? So yeah, I think this influence is when something has happened there, you feel more scared. (Klara, Spanish origin)

Likewise, Miriam shares her point of view compared to her boyfriend’s perspective:

[...] I’m also into true crime and I think that also affects your perspective on things. Because you heard the story. So, we had this serial killer, who was killing people specifically in Moscow, in this one park. And then we went to the park, just to walk around and it got dark and apparently there were no streetlights and I was like, this man has been in prison for 20 years, we’re getting killed by him. Exactly at this moment, because there were no streetlights and [my boyfriend] was like, no, no, why? We can just- I have a flashlight, I’m like, “great”?! [*ironically*] No, no, no, no. And we discussed it as well, because like he, whenever he went out, goes out anywhere, he doesn’t feel like this- the difference between going out when it’s light out and it’s dark out. (Miriam, Russian origin)

A further explanation for this pattern can be found in research on gendered engagement with true crime. Scholars argue that women are often more drawn to true-crime content because they use it as a form of safety learning and staying informed by seeking cues on how to recognize and avoid danger. Vicary and Fraley for example note, by “[...] understanding why an individual decides to kill, a woman can learn the warning signs to watch for in a jealous lover or stranger” (2010, p. 85). Nevertheless, what emerged among the male participants in this study- alongside Johanna’s account- was the impact of the widely reported case of the woman murdered in December 2025 in Stockholm. This suggests a level of awareness among the male students that complicates the assumption that women are uniformly more influenced by crime

narratives. Maurice, for example, who stated that he had not previously followed Swedish news, described experiencing a strong emotional impact from this event:

If you have asked me like a couple of months ago, then I would say no, but now? [...] She was killed during Christmas and that was like a wave of shock that encountered me and also other people in my environment. And since this has happened, I thought about this kind of violence or these violence dynamics in public spheres a bit more, because I thought okay, that could have been me or someone very close to me and it's kind of crazy. But then I also just think, okay but what's the consequence? Because the consequence cannot be "okay I'm staying like inside for the rest of my life". (Maurice, German origin)

Noah, in particular, emphasizes that this case made the possibility of crime feel much closer to him, especially because he had known of her from his previous studies:

So yeah, I mean, usually until that point I read the news and then if there was something about crimes, I'd be like, "it happens", it was so far away. And then with that story it was so close to home, that was just- that was definitely a point also after I had those news, like I didn't feel specifically unsafe, but it was a feeling of like implicit underlying. Yeah I don't know- I don't want to say danger, because I think that is a bit too strong word, but like on unease? Yes, yeah definitely. But it wasn't then tied to any specific places in Lund, but the overall situation. (Noah, German origin)

He describes "[...] this underlying implicit feeling of unease or danger when [he] knew that a person that [he] knows has been killed in a context like that [...]", which illustrates how receiving news in the new country of residence can significantly shape students' sense of safety.

Living an international student life in Lund

Although Young's ideal of city life is a theoretical and utopian construct, she emphasizes that such ideals must remain situated in actual experience. As she argues: "an ideal can inspire action for social change only if it arises from possibilities suggested by actual experience" (Young, 1990 p. 241). Following this logic, I juxtapose her conceptual framework with the empirical material from my interviews, using the participants' experiences to explore how the ideal city life is reflected or challenged in practice.

Young envisions a city in which neighborhoods overlap, boundaries are undefined and one cannot easily tell “[...] where one [neighborhood] ended and the other began” (ibid., p. 239). This ideal resonates with several participants’ experiences. Paul, for instance, appreciates Lund’s small scale because it allows him to feel more familiar with his surroundings than in his hometown in China. As he explains:

[...] but in China, like in this [city], it's quite different. You will feel clearly that you are entering another area. So that makes me sometimes a bit confused, but here it's quite fun, like I feel I am always in Lund. (Paul, Chinese origin)

Noah offers a contrasting perspective. While he acknowledges the value of a city without sharply defined neighborhoods, he does not perceive Lund as fitting this ideal. Referring to the area around the botanical garden, he notes:

In the pretty neighborhoods, the professor city here... [*points to our surroundings of the botanical garden*] It's just mansions. And then there's nobody there [at night]. And then other parts of the town [Lund], or perhaps more and more in Malmö, where it feels like more would happen... You know [...] there's a Swedish song by the title "Bullerby Is Dead" and the singer sings about how- if you live in the nice part of a town where the streetlights go on 8 sharp, you don't hear what happens in the other parts of town, where the streetlights are flickering or not working at all. You only get what you want to get- what is close to you. (Noah, German origin)

He makes this observation when comparing different areas of Lund, highlighting the contrast between the neighborhood “where the professors live” and other parts of the city- the ones that remain unheard from the point of the more privileged area. The parallels between these lived experiences and Young’s ideal underline how diminishing boundaries within a city can foster greater feelings of familiarity, safety and inclusion. This further connects to the concept of glocality where, according to Listerborn, living in multicultural neighborhoods is being connected to poor living conditions (2013, p. 291) and Sweden trying to establish clear boundaries between neighborhoods (ibid., p. 293)- which ultimately should be diminished through recognizing a glocal way of life. Hybrid cultures challenge the traditional way of life and therefore, acknowledging the pluralism of life trajectories “[...] calls for ‘a relational politics for a relational space’” (ibid., p. 302) which is coherent with Young’s call for recognizing differences without assimilation and exclusion (Young, 1990, p. 227).

Several participants describe how the large student population in Lund creates a sense of community, with students being perceived as peers rather than potential threats. As Miriam puts it, “It’s maybe my mistake that I don’t see students as a danger,” a sentiment shared by Paul and Leah. This stands in tension with Young’s critique of community as a unifying ideal. For Young, the notion of community comes from identification of a shared characteristic and assimilation of the community members: “they conceive the social subject as a relation of unity or mutuality composed by identification and symmetry among individuals within a totality” (ibid., p. 229). This means that it promotes homogeneity and marginalizes those who do not identify with the group characteristics (ibid., p. 234)- in this case, the sense of community is grounded in being an (international) student- a category that is in itself selective and exclusionary. Paul’s reflections illustrate this dynamic particularly clearly. Although he is an international student and could be categorized as an immigrant, he nonetheless distinguishes sharply between “international students” and “immigrants” more broadly:

A dangerous part, I guess first of all, is strange people. Yeah, like homeless or immigrants, we know we’re from different regions. Yeah, and we are a different age. [...] It’s related to Lund University. So, I know the people in Lund University are safe for me. But in Hamburg, I don’t know where they’re from. Yeah, maybe they’re immigrants or there are some people from somewhere else. And it’s quite different for me. (Paul, Chinese origin)

This illustrates how the student population in Lund produces an insider/outsider distinction that aligns with Young’s critique of community as a unifying ideal. It raises the question of whether students would benefit from moving away from community-based thinking toward Young’s notion of being together without relying on mutual identification- and thus without excluding others (ibid., p. 238). At the same time, given the already multicultural composition of international students, their shared status as “international students” may function as a necessary point of connection when navigating a new country of residence.

Young acknowledges the importance of intersecting social positions, even if she does not name this explicitly as intersectionality. She notes that “[...] most people have multiple group identifications, and thus group differences cut across every social group” (ibid., p. 236). For this reason, she argues for recognizing differences without assimilation (ibid., p. 227). Applied broadly to the interview material, many students describe Lund as an environment that is open and attentive to non-heteronormative expressions of identity. As Noah observes:

So, like one example that also here in Lund went out to me is that the iconography about the pedestrian street walks signs. They alternate 50/50 between male and women icons on the signs. And that's like the smallest things that I think you don't really consciously notice every day. But I guess you do notice- it's still subconsciously maybe. (Noah, German origin)

Maurice similarly highlights the visibility of inclusive design:

I think I'll say it's very inclusive, like from my point of view there are always signs for all gender toilets and for people with physical disabilities, who are sitting in a wheelchair- there's always the fact that they're very included and very visible- it makes them a bigger part of the daily life. (Maurice, German origin)

At the same time, he points out that more “female LGBTQ spaces” are needed in Lund and that men often lack awareness of violence in public spaces. This echoes Young’s observation that within broader categories- such as “women”- the experiences of certain subgroups, often white and middle-class, tend to dominate, while others remain marginalized (ibid., p. 236). Maurice’s comment therefore reinforces Young’s argument that group differences must be recognized and voiced rather than assimilated into a dominant narrative. This aligns with Listerborn’s call for a shift toward radical equality, which demands gender equality across all non-heteronormative identity narratives (2016, p. 252). It also connects to recognizing the effects of heteronormative masculine identity construction, which, if critically addressed, could contribute to dismantling the spatial expression of patriarchy (Valentine, 1989, p. 389). Placing masculine identities on an equal level would remove their hierarchical ordering and in turn, enable men to perceive themselves as equally capable of experiencing fear rather than being socialized into the role of the protector.

While Young’s ideal of city life is a deliberately utopian and abstract vision, it nevertheless provides a useful lens for analyzing the empirical material and identifying points of convergence and divergence that may inform potential change in Lund. When viewed through this framework, the findings on students’ perceptions of fear and safety suggest that increasing the visibility of non-heteronormative subgroups among international students, as well as reducing the perceived distinctions between neighborhoods within Lund, could contribute to a stronger sense of safety for students in the city.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine how international students in Lund perceive safety and fear in relation to temporal conditions, urban design and their individual life trajectories. It addressed the particular position of international students, as they are often overlooked in policy-making or treated primarily as a source of economic income and who face distinct challenges in their new environment, including language barriers, unfamiliar cultural norms and limited access to local news. At the same time, Sweden has in recent years experienced increasing residential segregation and an intensified public and political focus on the relationship between safety and urban design. Against this backdrop and given the high concentration of international students in Lund, the city provided a compelling context in which to explore how international students experience the gap between actual crime levels and their own perceived sense of fear and risk.

The narratives that emerged from the analysis were diverse, but several strong themes cut across the interviews. A central finding concerned the gendered dimension of safety. Although female participants generally reported feeling safe in Lund, they nevertheless employed distinct precautionary strategies and demonstrated a heightened awareness of potential risks. Male participants, by contrast, expressed awareness of staying safe at night primarily through the lens of female vulnerability and their perceived responsibility to protect women close to them- an attitude that may reflect prevailing masculinity norms. Cultural background and upbringing also shaped safety perceptions. Not only did the size and safety level of participants' hometowns matter, but those who came from environments they considered less safe than Lund displayed both heightened vigilance in their new surroundings and an appreciation for the calmer atmosphere. Growing up in contexts where safety was emphasized further influenced how students adapted to life abroad. Media narratives emerged as another influential factor. Participants described being affected by Swedish news reporting, which directly shaped their sense of safety regardless of gender. At the same time, many continued to follow news from their home countries in order to stay informed and potentially warn family members, an experience that speaks to the formation of glocal identities. Finally, several themes ran consistently through the interviews: the importance of the international student community, the desire for reduced neighborhood segregation in Lund and the significance of urban design elements such as lighting, greenery and architectural layout.

In terms of theoretical tools, the concepts of glocality (Listerborn, 2015) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) proved particularly applicable to the empirical material and offered strong support for the findings. As glocality highlights the tension between state-maintained territorial

boundaries in Swedish neighborhoods and the fluid, transnational experiences of migrants, this framework aligned with participants' experiences. Similarly, the exclusion of certain subgroups in Sweden, such as migrant women, resonated with interview statements calling for more inclusive spaces for non-heterosexual students and greater public awareness of violence against women in urban environments.

The theory of masculine identity in relation to fear (Day et al., 2003; Keel & Lee, 2025) also supported the data. Importantly to note however is that the male participants did not express a desire to see women in subordinate positions, rather, their narratives reflected how heteronormative constructions of masculinity can produce a sense of responsibility for women's safety, a reduced perception of their own vulnerability and a heightened need for control in unfamiliar environments. This dynamic was visible in their self-positioning as protectors, contrasted with the more precautionary strategies described by female participants.

Finally, Young's (1990) ideal of city life, although abstract, presented itself as a useful tool to interpret the data. Participants' desire for fewer static neighborhood boundaries aligns with Young's vision of an inclusive urban environment and connects back to the glocality framework. Moreover, the ideal city life emphasizes recognizing group differences without exclusion or forced assimilation which presents an aspiration echoed as well in participants' calls for greater visibility of public violence and stronger support for those affected. The only notable point of tension concerned Young's critique of community formation based on shared characteristics. While she argues that such communities risk excluding those who do not share the defining trait, most participants emphasized the importance of having a supportive community and identified international students as their primary peers. I argue that this does not contradict Young's theory: the category of "international student" is itself highly diverse and this shared identifier may facilitate integration into the new place of residence rather than restrict it.

The qualitative method of walk-along interviews proved highly valuable, as it not only created a more relaxed and conversational interview setting but also directly supported the study's focus on urban design. Participants were able to discuss safety while simultaneously pointing to concrete spatial examples, which prompted rich and often unexpected reflections, from observations about the perceived transparency of Swedish homes, with their many uncovered windows, to comments on green areas, park environments and lighting conditions. The constant flow of spatial impressions meant that participants rarely ran out of experiences to describe,

demonstrating the method's strength in coming up with embodied and situated accounts of safety.

The findings of this study offer insights that may support efforts to reduce neighborhood segregation for international students and inform more inclusive approaches to urban planning. In particular, they highlight the importance of considering not only women and non-heteronormative students in safety-related planning, but also international students more broadly- an often overlooked group in policy discussions despite their significant presence in Lund.

Ultimately, in answering the research question *How do international students experience fear and safety in public spaces at nighttime in Lund in relation to urban design and individual life trajectories?* this study shows that fear and safety are best understood as a glocal phenomenon, shaped by cultural background, transnational experiences and strongly influenced by gender in how students interpret and navigate their spatial surroundings. In essence, safety for international students in Lund emerges not from the city alone, particularly given the gap between actual crime levels and perceived fear, but from the glocal, gendered and culturally embedded ways through which they make sense of and navigate their surroundings.

Limitations

The limitations of this research project are multifaceted. First, future studies should examine how non-binary and gender-diverse students perceive safety, as this research focused primarily on binary gender categories. Second, although qualitative methods enabled an in-depth exploration of students' experiences, the findings cannot be generalized to all international students, as participants represented only eight countries of origin. Further potential limitations concern the selection of participants. It is likely that students who are more socially active were more inclined to participate, which may have introduced a self-selection bias. In addition, participants were not differentiated by study program, which may have resulted in a sample with similar academic backgrounds. Moreover, the interviews were conducted during a specific period of the academic year and perceptions of safety may vary depending on season, daylight hours or recent local events. Given that English was not the native language of either the researcher or the participants, the possibility of not fully conveying or capturing intended meanings must also be acknowledged. Because the research deliberately centered on Lund- a small university town- caution is needed when applying these findings to students living in larger urban contexts. Also, in a more extensive research project the difference between domestic and international students must be researched. While this study focused on gender,

nationality and media influence, future research should explore additional intersecting factors such as race, class and disability.

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Appendix

Interview-guide

1. Introduction: Cultural background & identity

- a. Current status (field of study, age, how long they have been here etc.) in Lund
- b. Place of origin
- c. Personal feeling of cultural differences to Sweden, Lund and their home country

2. City design

- a. Is there anything that the participants notice about the urban design of Lund?
- b. What makes them feel safe in general in a city?
- c. What makes them feel unsafe?
- d. Are there certain things that serve as good/bad criteria for living in a city (e.g. litter, street lightning etc.)?
- e. What would they potentially wish to be different in Lund?
- f. Did their choice of studying in Lund related to how safe the city appears to be?

3. Education and childhood

- a. Is there any influence on their safety perception from how they were raised?
- b. What does safety mean for them when going out?
- c. Was safety an issue when growing up (e.g. when starting to go out)?
- d. Is there anything they would have liked to be taught differently in hindsight?

4. Safety

- a. Are there any precautions they take when going out in Lund at night?
- b. If so, what are they?
- c. Are they in general interested/aware of their safety and are they potentially influenced by social media on this? If so, how?

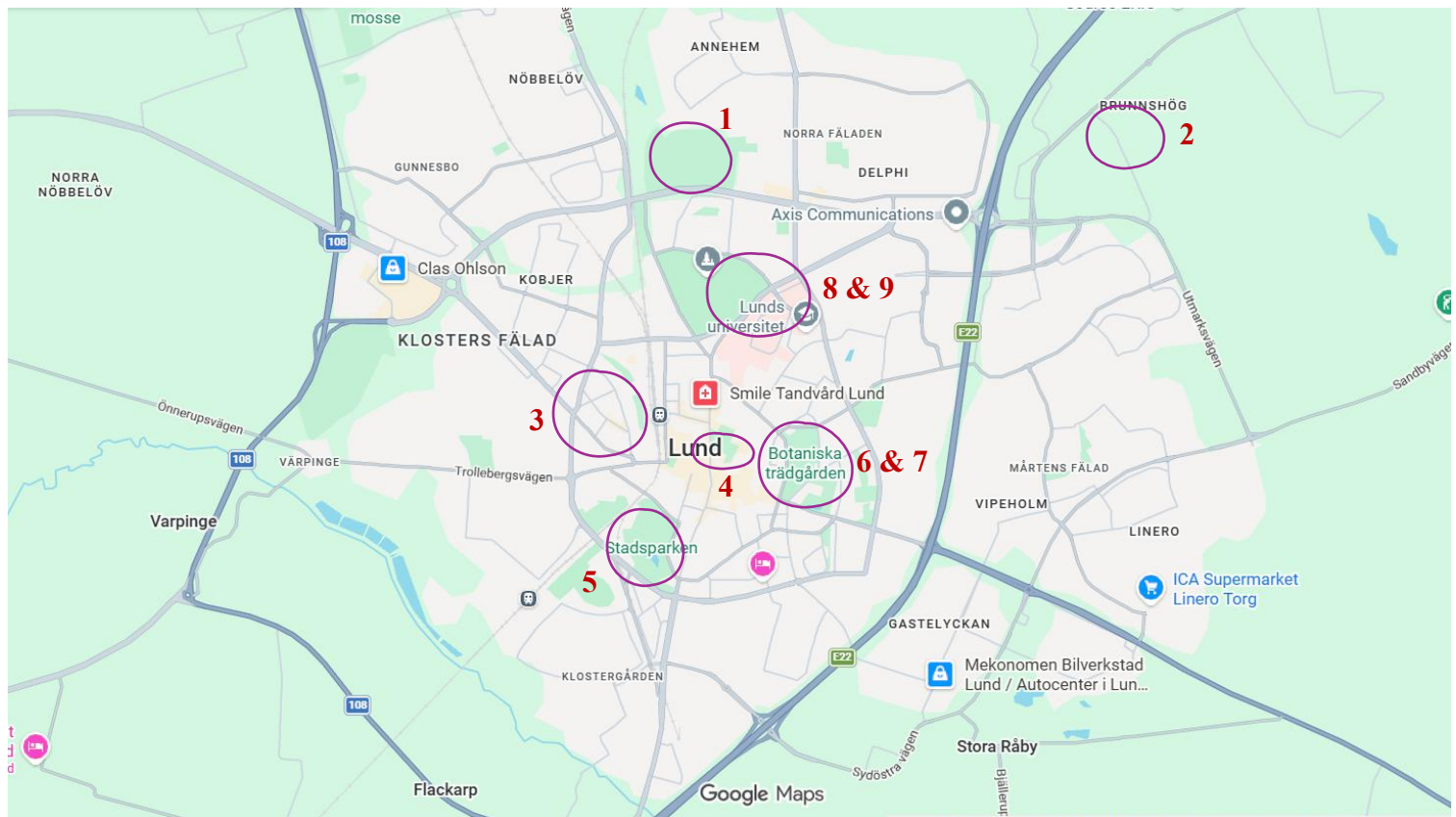
5. Gender

- a. Are there any anxieties related to their gender and safety feeling?
- b. Do you think in general sexuality contributes to feeling safe or unsafe?
- c. Any differences of their safety feeling to their home country?
- d. If yes, what is different?

➔ Is there something you would like to add?

➔ Special places in walk-alongs: what is it that makes you feel in this particular

Map of walk-along interviews



Walk-along Interviews:

- 1: Paul, Chinese origin, Sankt Hans Hill
- 2: Klara, Spanish origin, Kunskapsparken
- 3: Miriam, Russian origin, Lund C & western residential area
- 4: Johanna, Dutch origin, Lund inner part of the city
- 5: Felix, Polish origin, Stadsparken
- 6: Noah, German origin, Botaniska trädgården
- 7: Maurice, German origin, Botaniska trädgården
- 8: Nils, French-Japanese origin, area around Biomedicinskt centrum
- 9: Leah, Indian origin, area around Biomedicinskt centrum