

University of Stavanger  
Social Department



**Master Thesis:**

**In what ways, if any, does student exchange promote interaction with the culture of the host country? – Experiences of students going abroad to Norway on the Erasmus+ exchange programme**

A thesis submitted for the degree Master of Arts  
in the programme Nordic Social Work and Welfare

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## **Abstract**

In the following master thesis, I examine whether a student exchange with the Erasmus+ programme promotes the interaction with the culture of the host country. I analyse and describe the experiences of six Erasmus students with different cultural backgrounds that are going on a student exchange to Stavanger in Norway. While all participants showed a general interest in the Nordic countries, there are four main barriers keeping the exchange students from engaging with Norwegian people and their culture. These four barriers include the language, the culture, the university, and living the same experience as Erasmus students. I analyse these barriers by applying Bronfenbrenner's (1979) systems theory and the theory of social identity by Tajfel and Turner (1979) and locate these barriers to current literature on the subject matter. Overall, it seems that a student exchange does promote the interaction with different cultures, however, not necessarily with the culture of the host country. Based on the interviews, I discuss ways in which this interaction can be potentially improved.

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## **1. Introduction**

During my undergraduate degree (B.A.), I participated in an Erasmus exchange programme in Tromsø in Norway. I remember how easy it was to engage with people from different countries through events organised by the university and student organisations. This enabled me to get to know different cultures and backgrounds. Coming to Stavanger for my postgraduate degree (M.A.), I got to know many Erasmus students again. I have experienced what the university in Stavanger offers and how people from all over the world are brought together and engage with each other. However, I noticed that one aspect that seemed to be absent, was the engagement of international students with Norwegian people. During my Erasmus exchange in Tromsø as well as my master's degree in Stavanger I noticed that I barely interacted with local people and that this was the case for other exchange students too. I started to investigate whether there is research on this topic and found only a few studies that tried to shed light on this phenomenon I experienced.

The Erasmus programme, its acronym means EuRopean Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students, was established in 1987 and is a funding programme that supports students within Europe to travel abroad (European Commission, 2017; 2023). The funding programme supports European citizens from 27 EU member states plus Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Turkey. It makes it possible for students, trainees, and volunteers to go abroad for studying, doing an internship or a training in order to develop personally and professionally (European Commission, 2023). After the COVID pandemic in 2020 an improved version of the Erasmus+ programme was introduced a year later and is planned to last until 2027. The aim of the updated programme is to become more diverse and inclusive as well as paying attention to the environment and providing digital offers (European Commission, 2023).

Furthermore, the Erasmus+ programme can be closely linked to the European Union policymaking. Participation with the programme is supposed to promote democratic values and political unity while fostering a European citizenship and identity (Cairns et al., 2018; European Commission, 2023). So far studies have shown different results whether the programme is successful in doing so (European Commission, 2022), whether people participating in the programme already feel more European before going abroad (Kuhn, 2012), or whether the programme is ineffective fostering a European identity (Hadfield & Summerby-Murray, 2017; Van Mol, 2018).

Although an Erasmus exchange seems to promote interculturality, there are still obstacles when it comes to engaging with the culture of the host country (Özsisik, 2017; Udrea et al., 2015), thus the focus of my research is specifically on exchange students going abroad to Norway and their engagement with the Norwegian culture. My research question is whether a student exchange with the Erasmus programme promotes interaction with the culture of the host country or if international students tend to stay within their bubble of other international students. In order to answer this question, I interviewed Erasmus students coming to Stavanger from different cultural backgrounds in order to understand their reasons for doing an exchange, the meaning of the Norwegian culture for them and the engagement with it as well as their personal development during the exchange. In doing so I hoped to identify factors that enhance and diminish the engagement. Furthermore, I wanted to explore what can be improved in case the engagement between the exchange students and the host country is similar to my experience, thus practically non-existent.

## **2. Literature review**

In this literature review I will first present the process of my literature research, followed by a discussion about the Erasmus+ programme, focusing on the motivation to take part in such a mobility and the cultural component an Erasmus exchange has to offer. Hereby, I will especially be looking at the positive aspects of an exchange that are going to be presented through the lens of different studies. Lastly, I will be questioning some of these aspects which leads me to the necessity of my research and my research question.

### *2.1 Literature Research*

For my master thesis proposal, which was due a year before the master thesis, I did research following keywords through EBSCO (SocIndex): (“cultural exchange” or ERASMUS) (22.02.2022) with the condition that these words are part of the abstract. I filtered the results into English language, peer-reviewed and full-text articles published between 2000-2022 and I got 182 results. The topics of the articles I found, were quite broad due to the unspecific keywords I used. I went through the results and selected the articles based on the ideas I had at that point, mainly focusing on the cultural aspect an exchange has to offer.

In addition, I did another search through EBSCO when starting to write my thesis a year later in February 2023, in order see if there are any updated articles. I tried different keywords

like (SocIndex): (cultural competence or cultural awareness or cultural competency or cultural sensitivity AND Erasmus program) finding two results as well as my prior keywords (SocIndex): (“cultural exchange” or ERASMUS) finding the same results of 183 articles (22.02.2023). I used the same filters, English language, peer-reviewed and full-text articles published between 2000-2022. As my research question was more specific this time, I was able to narrow my literature research and select the articles according to my research question, thus I was able to find new articles that I have not paid attention to beforehand.

## *2.2 Erasmus+: A Cultural Exchange*

Bryntesson and colleagues (2018) and Cairns and colleagues (2018) point out that the motivation to participate in the Erasmus+ programme differs among students and can be narrowed down to three reasons. The first reason, is an academic orientation, meaning students are motivated by the education that is offered at the host university. By participating in courses related to their studies, the students want to expand their knowledge during their time spend abroad. The second reason refers to the labour market. Students with this motive choose to go abroad to enhance their employability, for example by trying to build a network during their exchange period. The third reason, to participate in the Erasmus+ programme is a cultural orientation, meaning that students base their decision on geographical and social factors. Some students also want to learn the language of the host country (ibid). As these three reasons are interwoven exchange students carry all three motives within them, however some are more distinct than others (Bryntesson et al., 2018). In this research I am particularly interested in the cultural orientation students bring with them when going on an Erasmus exchange, as I explore the cultural engagement with the host country. I assumed that exchange students who come to Norway with a cultural motivation show higher engagement with the local culture than exchange students with one of the other two motivations who show a different focus during their Erasmus exchange according to Bryntesson and colleagues (2018).

Reading through the different literature the aspect of culture plays an important role when doing an exchange (European Commission, 2023; Norviliene, 2012; Van Mol, 2018). According to the European Commission (2023), one outcome when participating in the Erasmus+ programme are intercultural competences. Intercultural competences can be defined as a “certain set of components, consisting of attitudes and personal qualities, knowledge, skills and cultural awareness.” (Norviliene, 2012, p. 60). As students move to a different country for a certain period of time and encounter a new culture their intercultural understanding and

awareness are enhanced. Different research supports this outcome, as a mobility seems to help students to gain cultural sensitivity as well as intercultural competences (Haj-Yehia & Erez, 2018; Norviliene, 2012; Özisik, 2017).

Norviliene (2012) shed light on the positive effect an exchange has on intercultural competence including personal development and changes of attitudes during an exchange. She conducted a qualitative study with 15 Lithuanian students that participated in an academic exchange programme. These students went to eight different countries including Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Spain, Italy, Norway, Portugal, and Sweden. According to her definition of intercultural competences, there are three categories, attitudes, knowledge, and skills with each of them having several subcategories. After their exchange the students show a difference in attitudes for example more understanding and tolerance towards other cultures. Furthermore, they gained knowledge about cultural and religious differences as well as different values and traditions. All of them improved their communication skills specifically their English language. The intercultural competences the students gained reflected in their attitudes, behaviours, knowledge, and skills. Furthermore, the students reported great personal development (ibid). Norviliene (2012) analysed the definitions of several different authors to explain the concept of intercultural competence which made it easy for me as a reader to understand and engage with the concept. However, it remains rather unclear to me how the exchange students developed on a personal level as there are no definitions or examples given.

A case study of a female Arab Moslem from Israel who went to Germany with the Erasmus programme shows similar results (Haj-Yehia & Erez, 2018). The student, in discussed by Haj-Yehia and Erez (2018), was journaling during and after her time abroad and these journals were analysed by the researchers. In addition, meetings with the student and the researcher took place. Her exchange experience was generally successful as she interacted with people from different cultures and shows more acceptance towards them. Moreover, the mobility shaped her cultural identity and she and was able to share about her own culture (ibid). The study stands out as a good relationship between the participant and the authors was established to ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis. In addition, the data gathering includes different methods like meetings and journals over a longer period of time providing in-depth data. However, Haj-Yehia and Erez (2018) do not address any limitations, making it difficult as a reader to critically engage with the study.

In another qualitative study 20 Turkish Erasmus students that went abroad to Germany, Romania, and Portugal were interviewed via e-mail (Özisik, 2017). The study focuses on the



aspect of cultural diversity the students experience during their ability and how the students deal with such. While the students showed prejudice towards the culture of the host country before their exchange, they seemed more tolerant and culturally sensitive afterwards (ibid). I would like to point out that the limitations Özisik (2017) addresses include the quantity of the participants and their background, while leaving out the aspect of gathering the data via e-mail, which excludes the observation of voice intonation, non-verbal signals, and body language effecting the interpretation of the data (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021).

To conclude, it seems that an exchange with the Erasmus+ programme can be seen as a cultural exchange as well. The students gain intercultural competences, appear to be more open and developed on a personal level after completing their exchange (European Commission, 2023; Norviliene, 2012; Özisik, 2017). Regardless, there is some room for improvement addressed in the studies I presented (Haj-Yehia & Erez, 2018; Norviliene, 2012), in addition to other research regarding the interaction of an Erasmus exchange and its cultural aspect (Dervin, 2011; Udrea et al., 2015; Van Mol, 2018).

### *2.3 Room for Improvement*

Looking at an Erasmus+ exchange as a cultural exchange the positive effects seem quite prominent (European Commission, 2023; Norviliene, 2012; Özisik, 2017). However, this seemed to be contradicting my own experience as an Erasmus student in Norway, where I engaged very little with the Norwegian people and its culture. Research suggests that there are certain barriers preventing students from engaging with the culture of the host country (Dervin, 2011; Udrea et al., 2015; Van Mol, 2018). These barriers include first, the responsibility of the host university (Udrea et al., 2015), second, the promotion of foreign language learning (Norviliene, 2012), third, cultural differences between the exchange students and the host country (Haj-Yehia & Erez, 2018) and lastly, facing the concept of othering when coming as a passing foreigner to the host country (Dervin, 2011).

A study focusing on the first aspect of the role the host university plays during an Erasmus+ exchange interviewed 20 Romanian students going to Spain, Portugal, Italy, France, Slovakia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Belgium (Udrea et al., 2015). Although it requires some intercultural adaption coming from the Erasmus students when going abroad to a new country, Udrea and colleagues (2015) emphasize that it is not only the responsibility of the exchange students but rather of the host university to support this process. However, it seems like the university is responsible for keeping international students within their micro-community,

making it difficult to engage with local people. It starts with the accommodation, placing international students in the same housing and continues with international student organisations mainly running events for exchange students (Udrea et al., 2015).

The second problem exchange students encounter is a language barrier when coming to the host country (Norviliene, 2012). On the one hand, this refers to the local language as most exchange students do not know speak the language of the host country. On the other hand, this refers to the English language that is most used during an exchange. An exchange student that is still practicing English or a citizen of the host country that does not speak English can create a barrier, thus a lack of communication between the exchange students and local citizens (ibid). Furthermore, studying abroad does not necessarily enhance language learning as other factors like the student's social network can influence language acquisition (Paradowski et al., 2021). The students that participated in the study of Norviliene (2012) wished for a better promotion of foreign language learning, in addition to an introduction to the culture of the host country and its traditions. I think this shows a general wish of the exchange students to get to know the culture of the host country and learn the language to overcome these barriers, however it seems to me that the university who does organise these activities does not take responsibility which can be connected to the first barrier.

This leads to the third barrier, that cultural differences can make it more difficult for exchange students to engage with the people of the host country (Haj-Yehia & Erez, 2018). In the case study on the female Arab Moslem from Israel who went on an exchange to Germany, the woman learned a lot about the German culture and other international students, still she spent her time mainly with other Muslim students, either from her country or from Germany with a Muslim background. Besides, she was struggling with inner conflicts and started to reflect on her own culture (Haj-Yehia & Erez, 2018). This supports the finding that an Erasmus+ student exchange also enhances cultural awareness (European Commission, 2023; Norviliene, 2012). In addition, I think this shows the strong connection of one's identity to one's culture and how an exchange with the Erasmus+ programme is a cultural exchange at the same time.

This study made me think of the concept of "othering", a division into "us" and "them" and leads to the fourth barrier of being an exchange student, thus a passing foreigner in the host country which can make it difficult to identify with the new country and its people (Dervin, 2011). A study by Dervin (2011) investigating the identification of Erasmus students focuses on the concept of othering, a division of "us" and "them", where "us" are the exchange students

and “them” are the host country. Dervin (2011) wondered how French Erasmus students in Finland talk about themselves and about the other cultures they engage with. He interviewed 12 French students during their Erasmus in Finland and concluded that the concept of “us” and “them” might be more interwoven than we think, as the answers of the students during the interview seemed to be contradictory. However, he also stressed the setting of an interview being problematic. As one talks about their identity, people decide how they want to present themselves, making it more difficult for the researcher to get authentic results (Dervin, 2011). Following Sosnowska-Buxton (2014), I am not sure I agree with a positivist notion of authentic results as all data is shaped by a particular narrative, but it does not mean that non-positivist analysis yields “un-authentic” results. Moreover, I think it is important to recognize that all research comes from “somewhere” and that it should be acknowledged.

In conclusion, it seems like there is room for improvement when speaking about the cultural engagement of Erasmus+ students with culture of the host country. Considering the four barriers, first the university could take more responsibility to enhance such an interaction (Udrea et al., 2015). Second, language learning should be promoted more, and it seems like providing information about the culture of the host county can make a difference (Norviliene, 2012). The latter could also raise awareness for the third barrier regarding the cultural differences making the students more aware of such. The last barrier seems difficult to overcome since Erasmus+ students have the role of passing foreigners making it more difficult to identify with the host country and its people thus creating an Erasmus bubble, where exchange students rather stay together with fellow exchange students (Dervin, 2011). Taking a closer look at the research that has been done regarding these different aspects I found some research gaps that I am going to address next.

#### *2.4 Research Gaps*

The study investigating the first barrier, the responsibility of the host university (Udrea et al., 2015) does not include any Northern European country as a host country. Furthermore, all participants are from Romania, thus having the same cultural background. In terms of my research, I was able to provide the perspective of students with different cultural backgrounds that are placed in a Norway as a host country. Regarding, the second barrier, the language, Norviliene (2012) uses the term “foreign language”, thus there is no clear division between the English language and the language of the host country. None of the host countries had English as their local language, however the quotes of the participants oftentimes refer to the English

language leaving the local language aside. In my study I have a clear division between the English language, the local language hence Norwegian and the barrier that both of these languages might create. Third, cultural differences can be a barrier between the exchange students and the host country. Adding to the case study from Haj-Yehia and Erez (2018), I included the perspectives of several students with different cultural backgrounds. Lastly, there seems to be a lack of identification with the host country. While Dervin (2011) applied the concept of othering by analysing the language the participants used in his study he did not get clear results, thus I moved away from that concept and focused on whether the Erasmus students form an in-group which they identify with. These research gaps are leading me to the purpose of my research.

### *2.5 Research Question*

In this study I aimed to explore the aspect of the cultural interaction between Erasmus students and the host country. Based on the previous research an Erasmus+ exchange could also be defined as a cultural exchange but to me it seems like this interaction happens primarily between the exchange students leaving the culture of the host country out of sight. It is not clear to me what role the host country plays. It might be that the host country is rather a location than a place to identify with as none of the above-mentioned studies explore why the exchange students chose the country they did. I assume that depending on the student's motivation the cultural interaction might be enhanced or diminished. Furthermore, I have noticed that most studies focus on participants coming from the same country and going to different host countries (Bryntesson et al., 2018; Norviliene, 2012; Özisik, 2017). Thus, I conducted my study the other way around, focusing on Norway as the host country while interviewing exchange students with different cultural backgrounds, making it more clear why these students chose Norway as a host country. I wanted to find out what the students think about the Norwegian culture and explore their engagement with it. As previous research shows there are certain barriers preventing the student's engagement with the host country, that is why I explored these barriers in my thesis. Based on the research gaps and the cultural aspect an Erasmus exchange has to offer, I formulated the following research question:

“In what ways, if any, does student exchange promote interaction with the culture of the host country? – Experiences of students going abroad to Norway on the Erasmus+ exchange programme.”

### **3. Research Methodology**

In this chapter I am going to discuss my research design, followed by the theoretical frameworks of this research, including reflexive thematic analysis (rTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006), Bronfenbrenner's (1979) systems theory and the theory of social identity by Tajfel and Turner (1979). Next, I shall analyse the process of finding my participants and reaching out to them. Lastly, I am going to reflect on my role as an interviewer while describing the process of interviewing, transcribing the interviews, and coding them.

#### *3.1 Research Design*

The aim of my thesis was to investigate whether a student exchange with the Erasmus programme promotes interaction with the culture of the host country or if international students tend to stay within their bubble of other international students. Thus, I conducted a qualitative study with Erasmus students coming to Norway, focusing specifically on why the exchange students go abroad to Stavanger in Norway, the meaning of the Norwegian culture to them and their engagement with it.

To gather the data, I chose semi-structured interviews to leave space for the students' own thoughts (Dearnley, 2005). Here, the interview guide works rather as a guideline than a rigid questionnaire which gives me as an interviewer the flexibility to engage with the students' responses and gain in-depth data (ibid). Being particularly interested in the cultural aspect an exchange has to offer I wanted to cover the following topics during the interview: (a) reasons for an exchange, specifically for choosing Norway and Stavanger, (b) the meaning of Norwegian culture and the engagement with it, (c) personal expectations, obstacles, and social life, and (d) personal development.

#### *3.2 Theoretical Framework*

For my research I chose a rTA (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as the idea for my research originated from my own experience as an Erasmus student. This form of analysis requires me as a researcher to include myself and be part of the research process which according to rTA is inevitable as I as the researcher always shape the narrative with my own personal experiences (ibid). In terms of epistemology, I am following a reflexive approach since I am co-constructing the story and not merely record it as an "objective" observer (Sosnowska-Buxton, 2014). After familiarizing myself with the data, I started looking for, and constructing, general themes. I

repeated this process several times until I felt that each theme has been reviewed, defined, and represents a central concept. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) this process can sometimes result in endless coding, so I followed their recommendation of ending the process when the themes fitted my data and connected well in relation to each other. To see the connection of my themes it has helped me to visualise them in form of a mind-map (see 4. “Analysis and Discussion”). Finally, I put the analysis into written form so that I can connect it to literature and theories (ibid).

Coming from a positivist background, it was difficult for me to write “me” and “I” in my thesis paper. I was used to leaving myself out of the research and I often caught myself writing “in this research” and “for this study” while rTA specifically requires the subjectivity of the researcher to be written in or “owned” (Braun & Clarke, n.d.). During the writing process I learned to make use of the rTA approach and incorporated myself more and more. Reflexivity required me to constantly, consider how I am shaping the narrative, and in what ways my personal experiences of being an exchange student influenced my thinking and analysis. For example, in the interview guide, I assumed that my participants engage very little with Norwegian students based on my own experience as an exchange student, so my interview guide already includes questions regarding recommendations to enhance the interaction of local and exchange students. Furthermore, I was going into my research with the assumption to find barriers which also reflects in the analysis where I do focus on the barriers that I discovered during the interviews.

In terms of my results, I applied Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) systems theory. This theory postulates systems on four different levels which are interdependent on one another meaning one level creates an effect on another level (Darling, 2007). The different levels range from the micro-level, meaning the individual to the meso-level, the exo-level and lastly the macro-level, meaning the society.

I applied these levels to my research, the micro-level refers to the Erasmus students and Norwegian students as individuals and how they actively shape their environment. The exchange students choose their classes, for example, and decide which activities they want to go to. The meso-level represents how experiences on the micro-level can influence other situations, showing their interconnectedness. An example would be the experience of an exchange student meeting drunk Norwegian students in a night club and how this can influence their encounter with each other in class. The exo-level represents the social environment of the exchange students and how this effects their contexts, while they are not being actively involved

in it. This can be seen as the influence the university has on the exchange students, for example by placing them in certain student houses. Depending on which student housing the exchange students are in their social environment is shaped by that. The macro-level represents the society, hence the rules and values the exchange students are embedded in also including the culture of this society. When the exchange students come to Norway, they most likely encounter a different culture and society compared to the one in their home country. As the macro-level changes this might require adaption from the exchange students. I will explore the cultural and societal differences on a macro-level and the possible effect they have on the other levels as they could potentially create a barrier between the exchange students and the local ones (Christensen, 2010).

As the levels are interdependent which also known as interconnectedness, I shall look at them in relation to one another and see how they influence each other (Darling, 2007). In doing so, my aim is to identify aspects that work well on the different levels as well as barriers that might prevent the interaction of the exchange students with the culture of the host country. By doing so, I might be able to suggest possible solutions that could enhance the interactions between different actors, such as Erasmus and local students as well as decision-makers.

Furthermore, I incorporated the theory of social identity by Tajfel and Turner (1979). One's social identity can be defined through the self-concept a person gains from being a member of a social group. Tajfel & Turner (1979) define a social group as:

A collection of individuals who perceive themselves to be members of the same social category, share some emotional involvement in this common definition of themselves, and achieve some degree of social consensus about the evaluation of their group and of their membership of it. (p. 59)

As my participants come to Norway, I assumed they identify in the same social category, such as being exchange students and sharing "the same" or similar life situation. The theory is based on three main assumptions, first, that individuals try to maintain a positive self-concept or try to improve it. Second, this self-concept includes one's social identity and is dependent on the membership with a group and the evaluation of this membership. Third, the evaluation of the membership is obtained through the comparison with another relevant group and can result in low or high prestige depending on the result of the evaluation (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

As people strive for a positive social identity the evaluation of one's group, also referred to as an "in-group," preferably results in a positive evaluation, thus a positive self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This evaluation is possible through the comparison with a group one does not identify, an "out-group". I assumed that the exchange students form an in-group, compare themselves to Norwegian students, for example, in their class or on parties as possible out-groups. Comparing one's in-group to a relevant out-group can positively strengthen one's social identity, while a negative evaluation can lead to changing one's in-group or trying to enhance the value on one's group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Based on the interviews I aim to shed light on who the exchange students identify with during their time in Norway and why they do so, and whether this identification strengthens or changes throughout their stay and possible reasons for that.

### 3.3 Participants

The University of Stavanger values cultural exchange (Erasmus Policy Statement, 2021-2027) and there are a lot of opportunities for exchange students that I, as an international student myself have experienced. These include the International Student Union (ISU), Coffee around the World and the Language Café. There I met many exchange students and was planning to gather participants from.

Initially, I wanted to interview six to ten Erasmus+ exchange students, two from each country with one being female and one being male. Coming from psychology, thus having a positivist mindset, I was focused on avoiding bias. In hindsight, this positivist assumption have become problematic for me as now I recognise that I, the researcher, shape the entire research project, and cannot "get out" of controlling it since it is me who writes and analyses it. But this has not been easy, and I felt conflicted about, and unsure of, my new role as a reflexive researcher and I am not sure I got everything "right". But I think about what Braun and Clarke (2019, p. 592, italics in original) said, "[q]ualitative researchers are always thinking, reflecting, learning and evolving – we do not reach a point where we have nothing more to learn. We are *journeying*, not arriving!" and feel that perhaps I did a good reflexive "job". Considering that I chose rTA any notion that my sample would be "representative" had to be re-thought. I realized that I was not looking for a representative sample but a sample that revealed personal stories and experiences of my participants and that such stories are as important as those that claim to represent society as a whole (Letherby, 2003).



I reached out to potential research participants via messages on Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, these were former Erasmus+ students I knew and asked if they would like to participate in a study about their Erasmus+ exchange. All students immediately agreed, however I had to exclude two of them as it turned out they were not funded by the Erasmus+ programme. The students that did not meet the criteria were coming from Romania and Poland, and I would have liked to get the experiences of students from Eastern European countries, especially as these experiences are underrepresented in research, in general (Suchland, 2011). However, now my research focuses on students coming from central European countries.

I interviewed six participants in total, four females and two males. All have taken part in the Erasmus+ exchange programme between the autumn semester in 2021 and the autumn semester in 2022. To limit ethical dilemmas, I ensured the participants anonymity by changing their names. I shall introduce my participants as I will be using their first names (pseudonyms) and refer to their cultural background which plays an important role in this research. On the one hand, participating in the Erasmus+ programme includes a cultural exchange where the students encounter a new culture (European Commission, 2023; Norviliene, 2012; Van Mol, 2018), on the other hand, I focus on the interaction of the exchange students with the Norwegian culture making cultural differences one of the focal points of this study. The first two participants I interviewed are Chloé and Theó, both are 24 years old from France. Chloé stayed in Stavanger for one semester and came back to the city after finishing her master's degree in France to work in Stavanger full-time. Theó extended his Erasmus exchange in Stavanger after one semester and stayed for another one. Furthermore, he decided to study in Stavanger full-time afterwards. Klara, whom I interviewed third, is from Germany, and is 28 years old, which made her the oldest participant. She also extended her stay after one exchange semester in addition to writing her thesis in Stavanger after her Erasmus exchange. My fourth participant is Julia from the Netherlands who is 24 years old, she extended her Erasmus exchange as well after one semester. Elena from Italy is my fifth participant, she is 23 years old and the youngest participants. She stayed in Stavanger for one exchange semester. Lastly, I interviewed Ramon who is 24 years old from Spain. After extending his exchange from one to two semester he decided to do his PhD in Stavanger. The four participants that extended their stay after one semester have lived in Stavanger for about a year while the other two participants that stayed for one semester lived in Stavanger for about five to six months.

### *3.4 Interviews*

Before the interview I made sure to send out the NSD consent letter to the participants, so it was ready by the day of the interview. I initially planned to do the interviews online or face-to-face depending on the location and the preference of the participant, however as the location of most participants differed, I conducted all interviews online via Teams.

I prepared before the interview by reading through the interview guide (see Appendix 7.1) where I made additional notes for myself in case, I got stuck. I felt more comfortable since I knew all my participants. Online interviews can present different challenges compared to face-to-face interviews for example participants might open up less in an online interview, which can be detrimental to the richness of the interviews (Curasi, 2001), I as an interviewer might not being able to see all non-verbal gestures of the participants which might impact my interpretation of what is said (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021). I tried to create a comfortable setting by having some small talk before I started the recording. Furthermore, I figured that the computer screen would not create a barrier since my participants, and I knew each other. It was after a few interviews that I started thinking what if the participants leave something out of the interview because they think I know that already since I know them. I am not sure if that was the case in any of the interviews, but I think that it should be taken into consideration as it has the potential to influence the data. There seems to be a lot that is unsaid in a research process, and on reflection I should have engaged with this silence more (Ryan-Flood & Gill, 2013).

It took me two interviews to feel more comfortable in my role as an interviewer. In the first interview for example I mixed up the order of some questions. I struggled with my background as a psychologist where I learned to follow a positivist approach and leave myself out of the interview to avoid bias. Working with rTA made me question whether bias free research is possible since I as a researcher bring my personal story and experiences with me into the research and shape it by doing so (Sosnowska-Buxton, 2014). While a positivist analysis seems rather limiting in that sense, I was able to acknowledge my own influence by applying rTA (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, I was struggling with not wanting to influence my participants' narratives as my positivist background has trained me to but the more I worked with rTA, the more I realised that I cannot fully remove myself and my own subjectivity from the whole knowledge production process. So, although I stuck to the interview guide and was quite rigid, more than I hoped and intended to, I realise this was a way of me trying to control the interview process as rooted in my positivist training.

To conclude, I feel like I should have practiced the interviews with another person beforehand to get more into my role as an interviewer in order to be able to engage with what is said by the participants instead of sticking to the questions in the interview guide. I would have been able to dive into other aspects mentioned by the participants during their interview, which might have provided a different focus during the analysis. Still, I am happy with the data that I have collected, and I enjoyed the process of interviewing as I had quite interesting conversations. Furthermore, I have managed to do the interviews within two weeks during the beginning of my thesis process which felt like a good start and kept me motivated to continue with the transcription and coding of the data.

### *3.5 Transcription and Coding*

Since all my interviews were conducted online on teams, I asked the participants for consent to use the transcription function of Teams during the interviews and all of them agreed to do so. In addition, I recorded the interviews since the transcription was not always correct. However, I saved a lot of time and transcribed immediately after each interview. I chose a non-verbatim form of transcription to the extent that I left out filler words and words that have been repeated several times after each other. I tried to edit rather lightly in order to portray what originally has been said by the participant (Poland, 2003). At the same time, I wanted to ensure the readability and comprehensibility for the reader of my research. Within two weeks, I was finished with the interviews as well as their transcription. In addition, I created a table including all participants and their answers so I would be able to compare similarities and differences. While creating the table I could already see some common themes which helped me during the coding process.

After finishing the transcription, I started to code each interview individually. I followed the six steps Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest when applying rTA. These steps include first familiarising myself with the data where I read the data several times in order to get ideas for coding. Next, I generated initial codes throughout the whole dataset. These codes are necessary for the third step, where based on the codes I looked for potential themes. Themes can link different codes and show their relationship. It is possible to visualise themes, so I created a mind-map. Themes can be displayed on different levels including main themes and sub-themes. Furthermore, they can be on a semantic level, describing the explicit meaning of the data or on a latent level, where a theme describes the underlying content of the data, and which already involves some interpretation. My themes are mainly based on a semantic level, and I also included the ideas from the overview that I created in order to come up with potential themes.

Fourth, I reviewed the themes, meaning I sorted them out, linked them, or separated them depending on their relationship to each other and their relevance for this research. This process happens on two levels, including level one where I looked for a coherent pattern throughout each interview and level two where I reviewed each interview in relation to the entire dataset. The outcome of reviewing my themes, was a thematic map which I shall discuss in section 4. “Analysis and Discussion of Results”. The fifth step included defining and naming the themes, that I was going to analyse in order to answer my research question. Lastly, the report is produced, in my case my M.A., where I used data extracts to present my themes including an analytic narrative.

After following step one and two where I re-read the interviews and coded them, I had some difficulty with step three, as I noticed that my themes were based on the questions I asked. However, when focusing on what has been said and looking at the content of the answer, I was able to create themes throughout the interview regardless of the questions. Furthermore, I was able to see re-occurring themes within one interview as well as between different interviews. Braun and Clarke (2006) divide the coding process into “data-driven” where the themes solely derive from the data and “theory-driven” where the themes are linked to prior questions that the researcher would like to answer. I feel like I incorporated both processes into my research. It was “data-driven” in the sense that I constructed the themes from the data that is from the interviews and “theory-driven” since I already had questions in mind, and I located my questions in specific theoretical locations, namely Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) systems theory and the theory of social identity by Tajfel and Turner (1977). I followed primarily the latter by coding around my research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

I like to work visually so I created a mind map where I organised the different themes to get an overall perspective. This can be related to the fourth step, a thematic map. I refined the names of my themes hand in hand with writing my analysis, hereby combining step five, defining the themes, and step six writing the report. Braun and Clarke (2006) divide the analysis into two types, one where the data set is described entirely and one where the focus is on a particular aspect of the data set. I followed a rich description of my data set because my interview guide evolved around a specific question which required me to include most of the content. In addition, a rich description is recommended when exploring an area that is under-researched which applies in my case (ibid).

Overall, I enjoyed the process of analysing my data in-depth by creating themes. I saw many connections and overlapping themes between the different interviews which made it

possible for me to visualise my themes in a mind-map. The only struggle I experienced was the feeling that there is always more to do. Compared to an exam where the date is feasible, the deadline for the thesis is further away. I tried to mitigate this issue by organising myself well, creating deadlines for myself and looking at the chapters of the thesis separately focusing on one chapter or sub-theme at a time. This helped me to stay ahead of my schedule and reduce stress.

### *3.6 Conclusion*

In conclusion, I presented the theoretical framework of my thesis, namely rTA (Braun & Clarke, 2006), Bronfenbrenner's (1979) systems theory, and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). I discussed the struggles I encountered coming from a positivist background and how I overcame them by familiarising myself with the approach and learning throughout the research process. Furthermore, I introduced my participants, described the process of interviewing them, and outlined the struggles I had with my role as an interviewer. Lastly, I discussed how I transcribed and coded my data in-depth by working with the six steps of rTA (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Next, I am going to analyse and discuss my data by applying the above-mentioned theories.

## **4. Analysis and Discussion of Results**

In this chapter I shall analyse my results and connect them to the discussed literature as well as Bronfenbrenner's (1979) systems theory, and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). I will start by presenting the way I have analysed the data and the mind map I have created, including the reasons why the exchange students chose Norway, the barriers that kept them from engaging with the Norwegian culture and how this can be improved.

The analysis of my data required me to not only construct, but also to look at, the themes in relation to each other. I like to work visually so I created a mind map where I organised the different themes to get an overall perspective. Taking a look at my research question "In what ways, if any, does student exchange promote interaction with the culture of the host country? – Experiences of students going abroad to Norway on the Erasmus+ exchange programme," my main focus is the promotion of cultural interaction with the host country, thus it is in the centre of the mind map.

1. Why Erasmus in Norway

⇒ Norwegian Culture

⇒ (Non-) Engagement

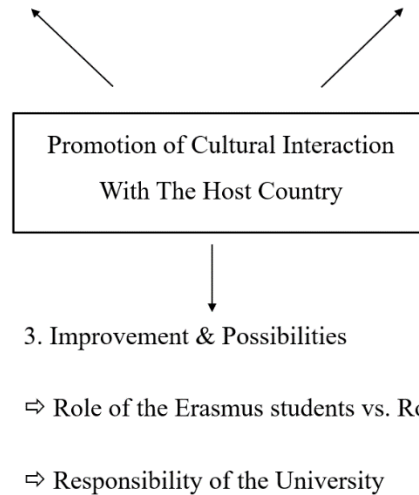
2. Barriers

⇒ Language

⇒ Culture

⇒ University

⇒ Living the same experience



Source: Author's own work

Zooming into my question, the focus is on Erasmus students coming to Norway which means that my first theme revolves around why the students chose Norway as their host country, the Norwegian culture to them, and the (non) engagement of the students with it. My second theme covers the barriers that prevented the exchange students from engaging with the Norwegian culture. These barriers include the language, the culture, the university, and the term “living the same experience”. The term “living the same experience” was mentioned in several interviews, hence comes from the data themselves, considering that Erasmus brings people together by creating a similar environment according to the exchange students. This sub-theme refers to the social life of the students and the friendships they built during their exchange semester. My third theme covers possibilities and aspects that can be improved, more specifically the role of the Erasmus and the Norwegian students as well as the responsibility of the university.

#### 4.1 Why Erasmus+ in Norway?

The initial reasons for the students to do an exchange semester can be divided into two groups. One group, of the two participants from France, went abroad to improve their English language skills. Théó said: “I think one of my first motivation was to learn English because I knew like English is very important and I was really really bad at English at that time.” The second group,

wanted to experience a new country and culture. For example, Elena who said: “I wanted to go away to some other country [...] and try to stay in a new culture for a while so, I did it for that reason.” In addition, some of the participants were looking for an international surrounding to broaden their horizons, getting out of their comfort zone and built a life by themselves. One also mentioned that it was recommended to her by other people and that it will look good on her resume. Except two participants, all the others extended their Erasmus exchange from one semester to a year, having such a good time made them prolong their stay.

Having an insight into why the students want to go abroad I was wondering why they chose Norway and more specifically Stavanger. All six participants showed a general interest in the Nordic countries, saying that the way of living differs compared to their home country. Especially the participants coming from France, Italy and Spain aimed for a cultural change that they want to explore and experience during their exchange semester. For example, Ramon from Spain who said: “I always found Norway a very interesting country to visit. Especially coming from the South of Europe. It's Northern Europe, it's appealing because it's different to what we're used to.” Julia, from the Netherlands, wrote a report about Norway in elementary school and liked the country ever since while Klara from Germany always was a fan of Scandinavia.

When it came to choosing the city, Stavanger was the only city proposed within Northern Europe for Theó, so he did not have a choice. The other students had more options and based their decision on their study programme. Ramon preferred Stavanger over Bergen due to his study programme. He said: “I also had Bergen as an option, but the study programme here made more sense for my studies.” Chloé had Norway as her first choice followed by other Nordic countries, however Stavanger made most sense with her study programme as well. She said: “For Bergen, we just had one place for the whole school. And Trondheim was not really related to my subject. I wasn't interested in it. So, it was a bit obvious for Stavanger for me.”

Klara's interest was sparked by two exchange students from Stavanger who were doing a master's degree at her home university, thus she chose the city based on that. Julia specifically wanted to go to Norway, saying “I like the whole Scandinavian kind of way of living and [wanted] to experience that for myself.” She chose Stavanger because of her study programme, also because Kristiansand did not fit, and Trondheim was too far North, in her opinion. Elena had chosen Stavanger for the same reason, Norway was only her third choice however, Trondheim was too far North, so she chose Stavanger instead.

To me it seemed like most of the participants were aiming for an Erasmus exchange to the Nordic countries and not specifically to Norway as their choice was based on a general interest in the Nordic culture. As Norway is part of the Scandinavian countries this implies getting to know the Scandinavian way of living through the Norwegian culture was the more general and not the specific aim of the students. When it comes to the choice of the city, Stavanger, the study programme was the leading factor to base the decision on, showing that a city choice might be secondary to the degree programme not the primary reason. These findings suggest that student exchange promotes the interaction with the culture of the host country because the students reported a general interest in a specific and different cultural region to their home country.

#### *4.2 Norwegian Culture*

We have this concept in Italy, that the life in the Northern countries is amazing. – Elena

The Norwegian culture idea is formed through the eyes of the participants, as Elena's quote would suggest. The quote shows a positive concept of Scandinavian or Nordic countries before her exchange semester, a reflection shared by other participants, too. Interestingly, as I will show later, while the participants had an almost homogenous idea of a Nordic country, the picture of the Norwegian people themselves differed among the participants. Surprisingly, even when the participants "didn't know anything about Nordic countries, so I was interested in that." – as reported by Chloé, she, like the other participants, came to Norway with certain ideas and stereotypes.

The participants associated Norway with a high quality of life. For example, Theó noted: "Northern countries are quite developed and have a good quality of life." Chloé referred to the Northern countries as "green countries" in terms of them being environmentally conscious and forward. Ramon and Julia emphasized the value of work-life balance where mental health plays an important role. Ramon said:

I really like the work life balance they have here. [...] How your mental health is also appreciated. And it's like "the people before the job/the work" right? So, you feel like you're protected in that sense.



Further, the participants mentioned the education system having high educational standards. Chloé said: “I didn't even think that I was going to be accepted in Norway because we had this thing that it's a high standard education.” Theó appreciated the high quality of classes, and that the teachers are very close to the students. Elena referred to Norway as a rich country, she said: “I mean they are a rich country, but they use their money in a good way. There is not a lot of poverty and there is a lot of work in means of transport and help for students.” In general, all six exchange students felt very welcome at the university. For example, Julia said: “I think the university organised a lot of activities which is really nice as an international student to get to know people and to get to do stuff, to not sit in your room all the time.” And Klara agrees: “the university here is really well organised and also is really helpful for international students.”

In addition, the participants associated great landscape and nature with Nordic countries and more specifically Norway. For example, Ramon said: “this idea we have in southern Europe of Norway being this nature, beauty, perfect.” The idea that Norwegians like to hike was also noted by the participants, however, for Julia this depended on the person. She said: “I thought they were very nature oriented, at least that was my expectation, which I realised wasn't always true, but it depended on the person.” And Elena said: “Everything was filled with nature and happiness. I don't know how to describe it, but people seemed really happy all the time.” This portrays the general picture of Norway and the other Nordic countries being perceived as happy countries (Helliwell et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the participants had certain ideas about the Norwegian people. Most participants had this idea of Norwegians being cold, distant, and introverted or closed off. An example would be Ramon who said: “there is this general idea I guess of Norwegians, and in general of the Nordics [sic] being cold people.” However, this stereotype was proved wrong for some of the participants. For example, Chloé said: “we have this maybe stereotype about a Nordic country and maybe the fact that they're super introverted, which could be right, but I I've never felt that like.” She said that she feels safer in Norway and gave an example where she explains that if people leave their bags somewhere open, they do not get stolen. Moreover, she said: “I love this trust that they put in people, and I feel the more trust you put, maybe the more respect you're having back.” Ramon agreed that Norwegians are very welcoming and that the culture is very accepting and open, and Klara also supported this by observing: “I was a bit positively surprised because I heard that Norwegians are supposed to be super distant that cold, but [...] everyone was super helpful.”

For other participants the view of the “cold Norwegian” did not change when they arrived in the country. Elena thought it would be worse but still she said: “people in Norway are a bit closed and not very willing to let you in their friends’ group.” Although she refers to Norwegians as kind due to having not many inhabitants, she felt like Norwegians live in a bubble do not care about problems outside of Norway. She said:

I think people normally kind of live in their bubble, outside of the world, I reckon, and they don't really care for the problems outside of Norway. So yes, that's one of the things that I didn't really enjoy about Norwegian culture.

Theó was surprised by the way people live in Norway, saying it is very different compared to other countries. “It's a bit hard to understand the Norwegian when you come here for the first time. [...] Like for example, I have seen they don't show too much emotion.”, he said, which is why they did not seem very welcoming to him in the beginning. Furthermore, he noticed more distance between the people, for instance, he observed that on a bus if there are two seats next to each other and one is taken people do not sit there but rather stand, he adds: “[...] so that's something very surprising even now.”

Furthermore, Chloé, Elena, Julia, and Theó talked about the party lifestyle of younger Norwegian people during their interviews. Theó and Chloé agreed, “I think they are mainly more open during parties because they get drunk”, Chloé said. And while the participants mentioned that young Norwegian people are different when they drink, more excited and more open to talk it is also perceived as a downside of the culture and difficult to understand why they heavily drink when living in a country that is perceived as happy (Helliwell et al., 2023). Elena said:

The downside [...] of the culture that I found was people getting drunk all the time. [...] I don't know, the unhappiness of some young people, but it was hard to understand why they were unhappy and their way of drinking and partying.

Klara is the only participant that struggled with the term culture. Although she said at the beginning that the Scandinavian countries have a similar culture to Germany, she later referred to the term *culture* as an *attitude*, saying:

I don't really think that there is the "Norwegian culture" or the "Swedish culture" or also like Germans. I think it's kind of a mix and it depends on the people that you get to know. [...] Maybe that is just a common cultural attitude, maybe not culture, but just attitudes.

This quote shows that she rather believes in cultural attitudes than cultures that are specifically connected to a country. During the interview I noticed that she contradicted herself with the term *culture*. Even though she said cultures do not exist, I was able to include her views in my analysis as she separated Scandinavian people and their behaviour from other countries at the same time.

Overall, there seemed to be positive associations about the Nordic countries, more specifically Norway, especially in relation to its education, the high quality of life, and its beautiful landscapes. The perception of Norwegian people differs among the participants, while some participants perceive Norwegians as friendly and welcoming, others describe them as cold which also did not change when coming to Norway. Throughout my analysis I will refer to the term "Norwegian culture" based on these descriptions. By doing so, I want to reflect the perception of my participants rather than following an academic definition of the term.

#### *4.3 (Non-)Engagement with the Norwegian Culture*

Analysing the interviews in the context of the engagement with the Norwegian culture, I noticed two different strands, namely i) the engagement with Norwegian people and ii) the adaption to Norwegian habits and rules that the students perceive differently to their home country.

Elaborating the first strand, five of the participants reported none to very little engagement with local people on a micro-level. Chloé had no contact with Norwegian people, referring to them, she said:

I think it was hard to keep in touch with them or just bond with them. [...] I think they are mainly more open during parties because they get drunk. Yes, because otherwise I've never really engaged with them.

She referred to them as nice and open when meeting them at parties because they were drunk but overall, she bonded more with other international students and said: “we were just bonding with each other being an Erasmus and living the same experience, that was so easy for us.” The friends she made were coming from Italy, Spain, Poland, and Colombia.

Theó could only recall that he spent time with exchange students from France, Portugal, Spain, Italy, Germany, and Mexico. It was after his exchange when he decided to study in Norway full-time and committed to learning the language that he started to make Norwegian friends, especially through his class and the Norwegian introduction week, also known as Fadder Week (Min SiS, 2022). During the Fadder Week the students are put together in groups by the university based on their study programme. The week is full of events and parties so the new students can get to know each other.

Julia did not bond with Norwegian students during her Fadder Week, saying “I mean the Fadder Week was ok, but I was in a group with a lot of Norwegians and basically all they did was partying. I mean it's nice, but I wanted to get to know people.” She referred to herself as a person that does not party that much. She met some Norwegians in her class through project groups and she also mentioned meeting some Norwegians during sport activities, like Salsa and Badminton. Overall, she said it was hard to meet Norwegians but when asked about who she spends her time with she named people from Germany, South Korea, Pakistan, Norway, France, Russia and also “a few from Norway”.

Elena had a similar experience, as she counted two Norwegian people in her friends' group. In general, she referred to Norwegian people as nice, but she never understood how to get into a Norwegians friends' group. She said:

The step you have to take to get into a Norwegian people group, I never understood how to make that. And, I don't know, it always seemed very hard and also, we didn't have many occasions, I think to hang out with Norwegian people.”

She had some group projects with them for her classes but that did not turn into friendships as she spend her free time mainly with international students. She reported seeing Norwegian people in different courses at the gym and said she could “see them a bit more in their normal life”. Apart from that she mainly met Norwegians at parties, where she talked with them about their habits, religion, and alcohol rules. But for her it was easier to talk to and connect with exchange students, she said: “at the coffee around the world or at the other things organised by the university, it was mainly exchange students, so it was easier to talk to them. And also, it was easier to connect to them.” Her friends were coming from Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, Germany, and Switzerland.

Ramon felt similarly to Elena, he found it a lot easier to bond with other international students. He said:

I guess, we did have a couple of Norwegians, who were also maybe studying and they kind of also joined the group, but mostly not. It was mostly other international students. [...] it's not like I try actively to be friends with internationals and to avoid Norwegians, but it's just way easier and it feels way easier with internationals than with Norwegians to establish bonds, I would say.

Although he had a few people from Norway in his friend's group he was spending his time mainly with international students from Spain, Italy, Germany, and Austria, thus he spent very little time with Norwegians.

Klara was the only participant who had the intention to meet at least one Norwegian person on her exchange year. She noticed that she was in an international bubble during her first exchange semester. Her friends were from Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria, Italy, Spain, Indonesia and Hong Kong as well as a few people from Norway. However, after deciding to stay for another semester she felt like she broke out of the international student bubble. She pushed herself and actively approached Norwegians. She said: “I just tried to put myself out there”. She started to do small talk with her Norwegian classmates, met them in the cafeteria and for coffee. In addition, she met many Norwegians at the courses at the gym. She felt like they were also becoming more interested in her since she showed interest in learning the Norwegian language and speaking to them. She described Norwegians as more open when

someone is speaking or trying to speak their language. Out of all participants it seems like Klara was engaging the most with Norwegian people when going in to her second exchange semester while the other students show little to no engagement with local people. It would also seem that the onus is on the exchange students to befriend Norwegians and not the other way round, and that activities offered by the university are not necessarily successful and bridging the gaps between the “us” and “them” groups.

In terms of the second strand, adoption of Norwegian habits and rules, I noticed more differences between the students. This strand can be considered on the macro-level, which represents the values embedded within society. While some of the students were consciously adapting to what they defined as Norwegian culture, others only recognized different habits and rules compared to their own culture. During the interviews the students gave different examples on what they perceived people doing differently in Norway. For example, Theó, who gave the aforementioned example of Norwegian people on a bus, explained:

Mostly in the bus people sit one by one. [...] there are two seats but there is someone sitting in one of them and you will not sit in the other so you will just stand up. That's just that, so that's something very surprising even now.

Although he noticed this behaviour, it is unclear if he had adapted to it as it still seemed to surprise him. Elena showed interest in the Norwegian religion, Protestantism, and talked to some Norwegians about the 6pm cut off time for selling alcohol, which was weird to her. In addition, she participated on the 17<sup>th</sup> of May, the Norwegian Liberation Day, saying, “that was really, really fun and interesting to see, how they [...] do this whole day of festivities for the liberation of the country.” This quote reflects her interest in the Norwegian culture, however as she is referring to “they” when talking about the Norwegian Liberation Day, this does not suggest that she identifies with their culture. It rather seems like she participated and had a good time as an outsider.

Julia noticed that Norwegian students like to party a lot. However, she is not a fan of that so did not adopt this behaviour. When I asked her what she gained from her exchange, she mentioned learning Norwegian and that it was really practical. By learning the language, she showed a form of adaptation, however it is unclear to me whether learning the language was in order to get to know the culture or if “practical” refers to her managing her daily life in the

Norwegian context, for example when ordering something in a café. Chloé, on the other hand, was far more appreciative of Norwegian society, she said:

[...] I feel way more safe in Norway [...]. When someone told me that they went on a hike and they have these houses with backpacks and stuff you can borrow and for me it was unbelievable to have that in France, maybe you wouldn't find those bags after some hours [refers to France]. I love this trust that they put in people, and I feel the more trust you put, maybe the more respect you're having back [refers to Norway].

Chloe clearly expressed a feeling of safety. She drew a connection between putting trust in people and gaining respect in return – this could be considered a sign of a cultural adaptation. She contrasted this trust in people to the lack of it in France. Ramon also talked about consciously adapting to the Norwegian culture, the positive influence it had on him, and the challenges of “coming back home,” to the Spanish culture:

I actually feel like I've become a bit more like them [Norwegians] after living here, you know. I got used to the handshakes [...] or the hugs. Now I go to Spain, and I cannot do the two kisses thing. [...] Because there is this aspect of space when you meet someone, and you respect the people's space and the way that people want to interact [refers to Norwegians]. And I think that's nice because it can be violent [sic], you know, in Spain it's normal to do the two kisses thing.

His words show a conscious reflection of how he is influenced by the Norwegian norms of giving people space – an oft appearing theme. He adapted to this way of interaction on a micro-level and sees it in a positive light. Even further, he moved away from the norm in the Spanish culture to kiss people when meeting them. This quote shows the influence of the culture one grows up in, hence the macro-level, and how being placed in a new culture can encourage to reflect one's habits and cultivating new ones that are represented on the micro-level. Klara also showed a conscious adaptation to the Norwegian habits on a micro-level. She started to

learn Norwegian a year before her Erasmus. Her goal was to use Norwegian in addition to meeting Norwegian people. Still, she struggled with the term *culture*. She said:

I don't really know when you ask me what's the Norwegian culture? I couldn't say anything. Probably, I think it's just you get used to the things how they handle it here and it just adapt to it because you don't want to be always the one who's at first glance the Not-Norwegian person.

Although she did not know what the Norwegian culture is to her, she also said she adapted to “how they handle things”, so for her “culture” is a way of doing or handling of “thing” that is presumably different to how Germans handle things. Moreover, for her it was important to “get used to” or adapt to the Norwegian ways of doing “things,” so she can blend in and not stand out as a Not-Norwegian. When I asked her what she is adapting to, it took her some time to come up with an example as she could not really phrase it, as though adaptation is a subtle process which is not necessarily conscious as she said, it is the small things, like, again often noted, not sitting next to another person in the bus. However, compared to Theó who only gave the example, Klara said she followed this norm. She also said, she that she did not approach people directly in Norway but then figured this is something she would not do in Germany either. I think this fits her description in the beginning of the interview of Germany being Northern or Central Europe, thus similar to the Scandinavian culture.

Overall, there was very little engagement between the exchange students and local Norwegian people. Klara seemed to be the exception compared to the other participants as she showed an active engagement at a micro-level. Although the students reported little to no engagement with Norwegians, the second aspect, adapting to Norwegian habits and rules, seems more prominent. While some students perceived differences between their own culture and the Norwegian one on a macro-level, other students were aware that they were adapting to it on a micro-level and consciously chose to do so.

#### *4.4 Barriers*

In this chapter, I shall discuss the four barriers that seem to prevent the interaction of exchange students with the culture of the host country and connect these barriers to the presented literature, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) systems theory, and the theory of social identity by Tajfel



and Turner (1979). The first barrier is the language, including both, Norwegian and English. The second barrier concerns different cultural backgrounds of the exchange students and their encounters with the Norwegian culture. The third barrier, I am going to discuss, is the role of the university that carries a lot of responsibility in bringing Erasmus students together while preventing them from engaging with local students. Lastly, I will discuss “living the same experience” that evolved during the interviews which includes the friendships the exchange students built and the lifestyle they lead.

#### *4.4.1 Language*

I experienced that speaking Norwegian is also more a door opener to get to know Norwegians. – Klara

When I asked the exchange students what they saw as potential barriers to engagement with Norwegian people and culture, half of them mentioned language as a key factor. In terms of systems theory (Christensen, 2010), I would place the language of a country on a macro-level as it is part of the society and its culture. I shall analyse this barrier looking at four interconnected dimensions. First, based on the interview data, it seems that Norwegian people prefer to speak Norwegian. I will explore this dimension using the experience of two different exchange students. Second, I would argue that this preference can be tied to a feeling of home. Third, the exchange students need to be proactive in learning the local language. And fourth, I shall analyse how these dimensions separate the exchange and local students during local activities.

In terms of the first dimension, Theó had been asking himself whether there are any potential barriers to engaging with Norwegians, he said:

Well, I think that's a question I have asked a lot and I was a bit focused on that. [...] A lot of Norwegians prefer to talk in Norwegian. And, so most of us, Erasmus [students] don't speak Norwegian, so it's one barrier.

Theó stated that Norwegian people prefer to talk in their local language which most Erasmus students do not speak indicating a significant barrier. Theó's experience is in sharp contrast to Klara who started learning Norwegian before her exchange. Thus, it is important to look at Theó's main motivation for doing an Erasmus+ exchange which was to learn English not Norwegian. He struggled in the first few months after coming to Norway but noticed that he improved his English after three months. It was only after his exchange year when he decided to study in Norway full-time that he started to learn Norwegian and engaging with Norwegians. Klara also was motivated to improve her language skills, but in her case, it was Norwegian, she said:

And I feel like if you speak [in Norwegian] to Norwegians, they're also more open. Then they actually hear that you have a really bad accent, so they ask you where you're from. I think if you speak English, of course they're also friendly, but they're not that interested. But if you show the interest in them because you try to speak their language, they're also a bit more open, and maybe they're also kind of happy to see that someone is learning the language.

Klara's experience is similar to Theó's in that Norwegian people prefer to speak Norwegian. Interestingly, Klara links speaking Norwegian as an exchange student, to Norwegians being more open as though the effort of speaking the local language is rewarded by shortening the distance and that it makes Norwegians happy. To me it seems speaking the local language is key to engaging with Norwegian people and culture.

Considering the second dimension, I would argue, drawing on the interviews, that people generally prefer to speak their local language. Language being placed on the macro-level is embedded within the society and culture, something the local people grow up with. Recalling the initial quote from Theó that Norwegian people prefer to speak Norwegian both, Klara and Ramon felt this was the case regardless of the country people are from, for example, Ramon said:

So, when you come here as a foreigner, let's say, it's kind of a bit difficult to integrate into the friend groups of Norwegians I would say. And I guess a big part of this is the language that even though they speak English, perfect English. [...] I guess everyone kind of has the need to speak their own language sometimes, it makes you feel more like home.

Although Norwegian speak perfect English, Ramon felt like people have the need to speak their local language because of its connection to home on a macro-level. The same can be applied to the exchange students as they might miss their home, thus trying to meet people speaking their language instead of Norwegian. The need of speaking one's local language became also visible when some of the participants talked about their friend groups in their home country. Klara, for example, pointed out that all her friends in Germany are either German or speak the German language fluently. Although Germans are also good at English, like their Norwegian peers, it seemed more natural to her to speak in her native language when in her home country. In terms of systems theory, the need to speak one's local language could be explained through the interconnectedness of the different levels (Darling, 2007). As the language is part of the macro-level, thus the society people grow up in, this influences the other levels as well. On the micro-level people speak with their friends and family most likely in their local language when at home, these experiences continue on the meso-level and lastly, are expressed on the exo-level, meaning the social environment that people are not directly involved in, but which is shaped by experiences in one's local language.

The third dimension, speaking the local language, can also be an obstacle as it requires an active engagement of the student on the micro-level. During Klara's first semester it was difficult for her to speak Norwegian since she mainly had international friends. However, after breaking out of that bubble she increasingly engaged with Norwegians, she said:

But in the beginning of course, it was not too easy because the only people I knew were international Erasmus students. So, I need to find all those Norwegians I wanted to talk to and it kind of worked out.

On the one hand, this portrays the difficulty of speaking the local language whilst in a bubble of international students. On the other hand, it shows Klara's active engagement on the micro-level, since she approached Norwegian people, thus actively shaping her environment. In addition, she explained that speaking the language brought her closer to Norwegian people. I imagine it might be an obstacle for some exchange students to have that level of confidence to approach strangers, let alone in a foreign country, especially when not knowing or just learning the language. Further, I would argue that some exchange students might struggle to learn the Norwegian language because their intention is to improve their English. For example, Chloé said:

The only thing that I didn't want to, is to just stick with French people because I wanted to really improve my English because also that was the point of going abroad and like being comfortable in speaking English, which French people are not really good at. [...]

At the beginning it was a bit hard. I remember also like I struggled sleeping because my brain was all the time trying to think in this new language.

Chloé, like Theó, came to Norway with the goal to improve her English and struggled to adapt to this "new" language, and diverted her attention from mastering English. Moreover, she did not feel comfortable speaking English before her exchange, thus having to speak Norwegian from scratch might have been an even bigger obstacle, I think. Klara also did not improve her Norwegian when she was hanging out with international people only.

The fourth dimension, Ramon pointed out that the language problem arose when trying to join local activities. He found mainly international students at English speaking events while Norwegian people were at local events. Therefore, the participants' experiences show that knowing the language makes it more likely that they will join local events and easier to meet Norwegians – this can be placed on the exo-level, as the social environment is shaped by one's language. Again, the same outcome can be seen, namely, that Norwegian and international students are separate because of the language barrier. Chloé mentioned this barrier almost in passing but did not delve into it, while Elena and Julia did not mention it in their interviews. All three participants focused on other potential barriers which I shall discuss later.

According to Norviliene (2012), foreign language skills seem quite important when going on an exchange and the language barrier can be a general hurdle when coming to a new country. While she refers to foreign language skills in general (ibid), I showed a clear division between the barrier that the English language can create and the barrier that arises from not knowing the local language, i.e., Norwegian. As language is on the macro-level and strongly influences the other levels. The first point is well illustrated by Klara who reported that speaking Norwegian was a door opener to get to know Norwegians – it also appears to keep most exchange students from engaging with the local people. On the one hand, the participants noted that Norwegians prefer to speak their own language - as it significantly influences the macro-level. On the other hand, the exchange students have to be proactive learning and speaking the language of the host country on the micro-level – as such, I would argue, this requires the capacity and confidence to do so, and the onus seems to be on the exchange not local students. I will discuss possible ways to overcome the language barrier in the “Possibilities and Improvement” section.

#### *4.4.2 Culture*

The second barrier when coming to a new country is being faced with a new culture. Like the language of a country, the culture can be placed on the macro-level, as it includes the values a society is embedded in. I shall analyse this barrier by focusing on the cultures of the participants compared to the Norwegian culture. When I asked the students what they think of the Norwegian culture, all of them associated the term culture with the way the people are and do “things” (see above). Therefore, I assumed that people express the culture through their behaviours and habits on a micro-level. As I discussed in “(Non-)Engagement with the Norwegian culture” section, five of the students reported none to very little engagement with Norwegian people, thus clearly showing that what and how people do is a barrier.

Theó said that it is not easy to understand Norwegian people at the beginning due to the cultural barrier. Although, he did not refer to France specifically, he felt that in other countries people are more likely to show their emotions. For example, when seeing someone after a long time, they would hug and talk happily while this is not the case for most of the Norwegian people he met. These micro-level experiences influence the meso-level as his future encounters with Norwegians will most likely be perceived in the same way. Theó noticed that Norwegians do and say things in a different way, especially compared to what he knows from France. It was after his exchange when his friends recommended him a book on the Norwegian culture which

helped him get a clearer picture. He said this made him see the differences and that had he known this before he came to Norway it would have been easier to overcome the cultural barrier. To me it seems like reading about the culture created an understanding of the Norwegian culture and its people for Theó, which potentially affected the micro- and meso-level, shaping his future encounters with Norwegians differently as Theó seemed more culturally open. Further, this finding can be connected to Norviliene's (2012), where the participants wished for an introduction to the culture of the host country and its traditions before their exchange in order to overcome this cultural barrier.

Elena also referred to the emotional, or feeling, side of people, especially compared to her home country Italy:

[...] People are really welcoming in Italy and really, they try to make you feel at home wherever you are, and you feel the love and affection and emotions a lot. And that is the thing that in Norway is not really present, like I didn't really feel affection from people. But I reckon it's not just Norway, but it's generally outside of Italy. It's really different from this point of view.

Elena's experiences echoed those of Theó's, that Norwegians are unlikely to show emotions and affection. However, she also pointed out that in other cultures the Italian degree of showing emotions and affection is not shown. To me it seems that when culture is placed on the macro-level, it significantly influences what people perceive typical for their country. Further, this statement portrays how different behaviours, especially when connected to emotions and affection, can create a cultural barrier. Ramon noticed this similarity comparing Norwegians to Spaniards. For him this cultural difference did not create a barrier as he adapted to, and appreciates, it (see above). It seems like Ramon, who continued his life in Stavanger after a year as an exchange student, adapted to some aspects of the culture compared to Elena who stayed only a semester. As systems theory does not consider time, I can only assume, based on my interviews, that the longer someone is exposed to a new culture, hence a new macro-level, one starts to adapt to it, which then shapes the other levels as well.

Despite Ramon's adaptation, he said it is difficult to become part of a Norwegian group, since Norwegian people already have their environment in Stavanger and speak their own

language. Further, he pointed out that this barrier exists regardless of the country and exchange students would experience the same issue when in Spain. Julia agreed, saying it is hard to meet Norwegian people and that in the Netherlands it would be the same as she mainly hangs out with Dutch people, and that it would require a lot of effort to meet international people in the Netherlands, meaning there is no cultural interaction. In terms of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) it appears that local people have formed their in-groups based on their culture, making it difficult for someone from the outside to join this group. Especially, in the case of exchange students, these cultural differences can make them an out-group, regardless of other similarities they might share with the local people, like the same religious beliefs or sexual orientation.

Chloé, on the other hand, noticed the cultural barrier the other way around, saying she learned about the French people while being in Norway:

I was surprised that people thought that we [French] were super rude and super mean people. You know, I think I learned about French and France being in Norway, being surrounded by other people, and now that I'm back in France, I can see those things that I maybe couldn't see before. I feel like in France we are in this bubble, maybe it's the case in every country. [...] Even when I came here [to Norway], being a foreigner and international, I've never felt pushed away by people like not integrated.

Her identification with the French people as an in-group is evident here, although it is a negative one as she described that French people are perceived as rude by other nationalities which she did not know before her exchange. Although she generalised her statement by saying that every country might like “a bubble”, she contradicted this later by saying that in Norway this is not the case. To me it seems like she talked about a potential cultural barrier when coming to France and that this would not be the case in Norway. It would seem that the culture is not a barrier but a factor that as an Erasmus student she had such a different way of living which I shall discuss further in “Living the same experience”. In Klara's case, the cultural barrier was non-existent, since she considered German and Scandinavian cultures similar, after all these countries speak Germanic languages.

Overall, it would seem that cultural differences can make it more difficult for exchange students to engage with the people of the host country. On the macro-level, one's culture is strongly embedded within society, and it might take time to adapt to and overcome cultural differences. Although all participants show a general interest in the Nordic countries, most of them did not engage with Norwegian people and the culture but primarily with people from an in-group with other international students. Similarly, to the case study on the female Arab Moslem from Israel in Germany (Haj-Yehia & Erez, 2018), Chloé and Ramon experienced some inner conflicts towards their own culture and started to reflect on that. I think the cultural barriers do not have to be overt but can be subtle, this especially rings true when Europe, "Western" in particular, is often considered a cultural monolith (see for example, Gobel et al., 2018; Lewicki, 2023). Thus, being used to different behaviours, having different ways of showing emotions and not speaking the same language while being a European does not mean being in an "in-group." So, I would argue that cultural exchange requires a nuanced approach and understanding if these differences are to be overcome and engagement between exchange and local students is to be enhanced.

#### *4.4.3 The role of the University*

In this section, I shall discuss the role and responsibility of the university of Stavanger (UiS). When I asked the exchange students what could be improved in order to enhance the engagement with the culture of the host country, all of them identified the university as a key factor. On the one hand, all participants reported that the university has helped them to settle in, especially at the beginning. On the other hand, it is the university that, perhaps inadvertently, keeps the exchange students in their bubble, thus decreasing the engagement between them and their Norwegian peers. First, I am going to talk about different events organised by the student welfare organisation of the UiS, focusing on two events in more detail. Second, I shall discuss one organisation that works under the umbrella of the UiS and lastly, I will look at the placement of the international students in the student housing.

Ramon explained that the university organised many events for students to meet other students, ranging from sports and casual activities to parties and different courses, like cooking and dog therapy, providing something for every interest. On a micro-level exchange students as well as Norwegian students choose which events they want to attend depending on their preferences – which does not present a division at first glance. However, taking a closer look at the promotion of the events on the Min SiS App, My SiS App, the English version has



different events than the Norwegian version (Min SiS, n.d.). SiS is the student welfare organisation of Stavanger and located on campus. It organises events for students and takes care of the housing and other practical matters that students need to know when studying at the UiS (Min SiS, n.d.). While Norwegian students have the possibility to choose between events in Norwegian and English, the international students are only provided with the English events which, I would argue, creates a division on the exo-level. This level effects the students' context while they are not actively involved in it. By being provided with the English version of the app, they are automatically "choosing" – I write in quotation marks because this does not seem like a choice, but a decision made on their behalf by the UiS – between different events compared to their Norwegian peers. In light of my aforementioned findings, many exchange students come without, or very little, knowledge of Norwegian, thus such language segregation presents a barrier as the exchange students are less likely switch to the Norwegian version of the app.

One popular event seems to be the Coffee Around the World, which is a weekly event where international students present their country. Except for Theó and Ramon, other participants mentioned this event and said they met international people there and none of the participants mentioned whether they met any Norwegians there. Thus, this would seem to be an event primarily for international students, Elena said: "But at the Coffee Around the World or at the other things organised by the university, it was mainly exchange students, so it was easier to talk to them. And also, it was easier to connect to them." Elena explained that mainly exchange students were present and that it was easier for her to talk and connect with them forming an in-group. This process can be placed on a meso-level, as the positive encounters between the exchange students can strengthen their in-group while it might decrease opportunities to engage with local students, a finding also reported by Udrea and colleagues (2015).

An event where this division seems partial, was the Fadder Week – an event also organised by the university of Stavanger. Three students reported they got in touch with Norwegian students there. In Julia's case the Norwegian people in her group were only drinking while she wanted to make friends and preferred other activities than partying. On a meso-level, this can be perceived as a negative experience with Norwegian students which might shape her next encounter with local people in a negative way. This in turn might make it more likely that she will spend time with international students rather than Norwegians – this finding also suggests that there are different drinking cultures between the exchange and Norwegian

students. Chloé mentioned that the Fadder Week has helped her to meet international students, not Norwegians though. In Theó's case it was after his exchange when he started to study in Norway full-time that he made Norwegian friends from his class during this week. It is interesting that the only event where the university places exchange and local students together is still marked by cultural separation. Thus, the UiS plays a major role on the exo-level by deciding how international students are placed.

An organisation under the umbrella of the UiS, is the ISU. This organisation offers events especially for international students. Julia reported that meeting people has helped her to settle in and that she met these people mainly through the ISU. While it seems necessary to have an organisation specifically focused on the needs of international students, there seems to be a lack of events and organisations that try to bring international and Norwegian students together – this finding aligns with the Udrea and colleagues' (2015) study.

The role of the university is also visible in terms of the students housing as SiS decides where they place students, thus influencing the social environment of the exchange students – this is the exo-level. Theó said he made a lot of friends through the students housing but that these were international people only. This also appears to be the case for Chloé, Elena, Julia, and Klara. All of them met their international friends through the students housing or the students housing of other exchange students, where they cooked together, hung out, and partied together. The division of the exchange and local students in terms of the accommodation is also addressed by Udrea and colleagues (2015), who describe this as a symbolic segregation. It seems like international students are kept in their in-group by the UiS which is based on them being exchange students – I do not claim that this is a deliberate act by the UiS but it is an important finding that I think needs addressing.

In conclusion, it seems like the university plays a major role in segregating exchange students from Norwegian students by shaping the environment they created for the exchange students. While the exchange students do make their own decisions on a micro-level the selection from what to choose is decided on by the university on an exo-level. Furthermore, being surrounded primarily by international students influences the meso-level, where the positive encounters of the exchange students with each other can create a strong in-group feeling, thus decreasing the likelihood of interaction with local students, and rather perceiving them as an out-group. While Udrea and colleagues (2015) write that the host university can create more challenges than support, the participants in my study were rather grateful for the help they received from the UiS, which has helped them to settle in and make friends although

these were not Norwegian. There is some room for improvement in order to enhance the interaction of exchange and local students, which I will discuss in “Possibilities and Improvement”.

#### 4.4.4 *Living The Same Experience*

And even if we are not from the same country, I love the fact that that didn't mean anything, we were just people living an experience and it didn't matter where we were from. – Chloé

The biggest barrier that the students described was the context in which they lived in compared to the context the local people live in. First, I shall discuss that despite all students being seemingly placed in the same university, the exchange students built a strong in-group and did not share the same bubble as the local students. Second, I will look at exchange students *as* travellers (Udrea et al., 2015), whose different lifestyle from the one of local people was another dimension of the barrier. Third, I shall focus on a general problem of making friends in a limited time of one or two semesters in a new country where local people have already built their life.

When I asked the exchange students what has helped them to settle in, it was the people they met and the friendships they made which seemed to have shaped their experience as Erasmus students. However, as mentioned before, the participants mainly had international friends who shaped their social life and less local people. Chloé brought up the term of “living the same experience,” which was also mentioned by other participants. For example, they referred to Erasmus students as “we are all the same,” “we are all new”, “we are in different environments [than Norwegians]”, and “people who were in the same situation”. Speaking of “we,” the participants clearly identified as exchange students forming an in-group. I think that Chloé’s “living the same experience” perfectly encapsulates all the above terms, she explained:

I feel like being in this Erasmus programme we had such a different way of living. We were just thinking of having fun mainly and like I felt that, you know, people are doing their masters, so it's like a whole completely different way of studying or maybe approaching people. We were just bonding with each other being an Erasmus and living

the same experience, that was so easy for us. [...] And even if we are not from the same country, I love the fact that that didn't mean anything we were just people *living an experience* [emphasis mine] and it didn't matter where we were coming from.

She reflects on the ease doing an Erasmus exchange, moving away from the academic part of being a student to having fun and meeting new people during an exchange. I think, this can be thought of as a representation of an Erasmus bubble that seems to establish *automatically* by the virtue of “living the same experience” as though this process happens by itself. This is also reflected in Chloé’s quote as she said that it did not matter where “we” as in the other exchange students are from. On a micro-level the Erasmus students bond over “living the same experience”, meaning their lifestyle was quite similar in terms of how they structured their daily life focusing on “having fun”, as Chloé said. Further, this could create positive experiences on the meso-level, as the exchange students are more open for encounters with other exchange students.

As the exchange students are placed in the same situation on an exo-level, they bond with each other through that and form a strong in-group. They are able to comfort each other as none of them have friends when they come to Stavanger and each of them tries to build a life during their time abroad. I would argue, that while this shows cultural openness, this openness seems to be directed at other exchange not local students. This makes sense, as according to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) the positive view of one’s in-group strengthens one’s social identity and enhances the value of such a group, while it decreases the likeliness to identify with the out-group, i.e., Norwegian students, moving further away from them.

Udrea and colleagues (2015) argue that *traveller* is a more adequate description than student in relation to Erasmus students. For example, Chloé, like other participants, talked more about her exchange experiences, than her academic achievements. Ramon referred to international students as visitors which I think shows the transient nature of an Erasmus student and akin to the term traveller. Moreover, such understanding of exchange students implies a different lifestyle compared to someone that lives and studies in Norway full-time. The exchange students know that they are going to leave again, thus they might have different expectations and look for different things than someone who is settled in Norway – but also are made to have different expectations and look for different things by the actions of the university, for example (see above).

Ending up in an Erasmus bubble is likely to happen on an exchange regardless of the country, thus not connected to Norway specifically. As local people already have built their life and might not be looking for new acquaintances who will only stay for a limited time, a point illustrated by Klara:

[...] I think also for international students coming to Germany, it might be the same problem, maybe. I think it's just the thing that you live in this international student exchange bubble. You only stay for three or five, six months and then it's always probably hard to really make friends with the people who live there, who stay there. Because also for them it's the question "Okay, do you really want to make the effort of getting to know this person, letting them in, this person is going to leave and disappear again?" So it's kind of not really suffering, but I mean it's hard to just let in friends, [as they] go again and you know that you won't live at the same place again. So, I think it's kind of natural for exchange students. I don't really think that it's only a Norwegian thing.

Klara referred to the emotional aspect of friendships and the difficulty of, or unwillingness to, investing in a friendship that might be only for a few months. She also explained that the same would happen for an exchange student that comes to Germany. Other participants agreed, for example, Ramon said that Spaniards would stick together and if an exchange student came to Spain, they would not share the same environment, thus not become friends. This aspect already was apparent in the cultural barrier analysis. As local people have already formed their in-groups it is difficult for foreigners to join regardless of other similarities they might share. Elena said for her it is similar in Italy where she barely sees any exchange students in a group with Italians and Julia agreed. She has mainly Dutch friends and said: "if you don't look for international people you don't find them."

In conclusion, the difficulty to make local friends seems like a general problem to me, when exchange students come to their host country. On the one hand, the exchange students form a strong in-group, because they share the same bubble and are "living the same experience". On the other hand, the local people have already built their lives and might not be

looking for new friends that are in Norway only for a limited amount of time making it emotionally difficult to say goodbye again.

#### *4.5 Possibilities and Improvement*

Looking at the four barriers language, culture, responsibility of the university and “living the same experience” there are ways to improve the cultural interaction of exchange students with the host country. These solutions can be divided first, into the role the Erasmus students and the Norwegian students play on the micro-level and second, the role the university plays, mainly, on the exo-level, including the promotion of joint activities, mixed housing, culture, and language.

First, it seems like some of the Erasmus students see themselves as responsible for being more open and proactive in approaching Norwegian students and vice versa. Ramon said that international students tend to stay in their bubble and that he saw this, especially, among other Spanish exchange students. It appears that they feel comfortable in the in-group they have created. Ramon suggested that they could be more proactive which according to systems theory can be placed on the micro-level as the individuals create their own environment. Klara illustrated this proactiveness by breaking out of the bubble of international students. Julia, on the other hand, saw the responsibility also among the Norwegian students, she said:

I think Norwegians [...] they already have their friends, so they're kind of in the same bubble, but there's nothing wrong with breaking out of the bubble, but it has to come from themselves as well.

As I discussed previously, the Erasmus students seem to form a bubble, however Julia's quote shows that Norwegian students also live in their bubble and suggested that they, too, should break out of it. This shows that there both sides need to be proactive in fostering meaningful engagement with each other – as exchange students see it, not Norwegian students as I did not speak to them. I think it is possible that the local students face other barriers like not wanting to emotionally invest into friendship that is limited to a certain amount of time in addition to other barriers – as reflected in my interviews.

Second, in terms of what the university of Stavanger can do to foster the interaction between exchange and local students, especially on the exo-level. As the Erasmus students

come to Stavanger without knowing anyone, they go to activities to meet people. Several of the participants suggested that the university could introduce activities that bring Norwegian and international students together. To Julia it seemed like Norwegian people are not aware of the activities offered by SiS and suggested making it more known to them. I think this could be promoted through the app or on the website, in addition to creating events specifically addressing the cultural interaction as it seems like the university is not aware of the lack of engagement, in my opinion. Moreover, student organisations could focus on the integration as well, Theó addressed this problem:

[...] I think it's how the university is organised. For example, associations where a group of Norwegians go to meet and Erasmus students. Because I think they do it for exchange only. Mostly when you come you are living in a building with Erasmus [students] and mostly stay only with them. And I think if the university organised some kind of activities with Norwegians and Erasmus [students], I think it's gonna [sic] be nice to have. And also, if you have a bit of introduction of the Norwegian culture when you arrive. For example, I think it's gonna [sic] be nice because I was reading some books to understand Norwegians. [...] I really saw the difference of culture. So, I think these kinds of things if I knew them before. Maybe I would pass or go over this barrier culture like that. So, I think we need to learn more about the culture. Yes, so I think something like that and more activities including [Norwegians] [...].

Theó questioned the way the university is organised, offering activities solely for international students, placing them together in student housing and a lack of knowledge in terms of the Norwegian culture which might prevented him from the engagement with local students. I argue that placing both exchange and local students in the same housing can have a positive effect on the exo-level as this might foster the engagement between them. Further, in the study of Norviliene (2012) the participants asked for an introduction to the culture of the host country and its traditions as well – so this is a known issue which surprisingly is not addressed by the UiS. I think this should be taken into consideration as culture is one of the

barriers keeping the international students from interacting with local students, and vice versa. This could address stigma and stereotypes as well as create an understanding of how things work in Norway and in so doing influence the meso-level. Thus, shaping future experiences with local people in a positive way. In addition, Elena suggested a guide on how to live in Norway, including prices and the use of transport and supermarkets in order to help with the process of settling in. In terms of engagement with Norwegian people she still had her doubts since Norwegian people already have their life here a sentiment Chloé agreed with. Klara who came to Stavanger in Spring wished for more socialising events in general, since there is the Fadder Week at the beginning of the autumn semester she felt like no student organisation is aware of all the exchange students coming in Spring.

Ramon wished for an environment that can help international and Norwegian students to interact that is independent from the university, but he saw the language barrier as significant in doing this. However, I think this barrier could be overcome, if the university offered Norwegian language courses that are affordable for exchange students or free. Klara reported that these courses are quite expensive creating a financial barrier to some students and as she already started to learn Norwegian before coming to Stavanger, there was no course that addressed her needs. However, other participants did not mention the language courses offered by the UiS but it is difficult to ascertain if it was because they did not see it as important or because they did not know it was available. The study of Norviliene (2012) also highlighted that the participants wished for a better promotion of foreign language learning during their exchange. I think that the promotion of learning Norwegian in addition to offering courses that are affordable for student and providing different levels might reduce the language barrier. Thus, making the exchange students wanting to learn Norwegian on a micro-level. Overall, there seem to be many steps the university and its organisations can take on the exo-level to foster the interaction between exchange students with the culture of the host country.

## **5. Conclusions and Recommendations**

Going back to my initial question “In what ways, if any, does student exchange promote interaction with the culture of the host country? – Experiences of students going abroad to Norway on the Erasmus+ exchange programme.” I showed four barriers that keep exchange students from the engagement with local students. These four barriers include the language and the culture, which can be placed on the macro-level, the responsibility of the university which mainly effects the exo-level, and lastly, living the same experience, as the Erasmus students



form a strong in-group on the micro-level. As these levels are interconnected, they influence each other making the engagement of exchange students with the culture of the host country even more difficult. Learning Norwegian did not seem common among exchange students making it difficult to join the environment of Norwegian people who, in the eyes of the participants, prefer to speak Norwegian rather than English.

In addition, cultural differences might be an obstacle. Although the exchange students engaged with different cultures and appeared to become more open as their exchange semester progresses, they did not show a lot of engagement with the Norwegian culture. Furthermore, the university keeps the exchange students within their community by creating activities mainly for them, placing them in the same housing and making it difficult to learn Norwegian. Lastly, it seems like the Erasmus students lead such a different life than the local people, so they have been creating an in-group they feel comfortable in and making it difficult to break out of.

I have the impression that the university is not aware of its power in shaping the exo-level of the exchange students, thus inadvertently supporting the formation of such a strong in-group on the micro-level. I think, the university could change this by creating joint activities and mixed student housing as well as promoting Norwegian language learning. Furthermore, I think it is necessary for the Erasmus students to become more active in approaching Norwegian people. My participants encountered Norwegian students mainly in class, at the gym and at parties. These occasions might offer an opportunity for more engagement with each other.

Although there are ways to enhance the engagement with the culture of the host country, I think that the limited amount of time an Erasmus student spends in Norway which essentially makes them a tourist or visitor makes it difficult to build friendships with local people and to overcome the cultural differences since they know they will be leaving. To me it seems like the exchange students strongly bond through sharing the same situation which makes me conclude that a student exchange does promote interaction with different cultures however, not necessarily with the culture of the host country.

### *5.1 Limitations and Future Studies*

There are five limitations that I would like to address in terms of my research and analysis – this is not an exhaustive list but due to limited space I shall address only these. First, I noticed that coming into this research from a positivist background and being new to rTA, I was a bit rigid in my interviews and struggled with my role and how I shaped the whole research process, from its conception to completion. But now I appreciate that all research production is

located in the researcher's and her participants experiences (Sosnowska-Buxton, 2014; Letherby, 2003).

Second, doing the interviews online I was not able to see the body language including non-verbal gestures of the participants which probably impacted my interpretation of the data (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021). Besides, online interviews can be less rich compared to face-to-face interviews meaning some aspects might not have been mentioned by the participants (Curasi, 2001). Yet, despite these challenges I gathered rich data, but this experience has taught me the limitations of working online and building reciprocity.

Third, I only represented the perspective of exchange students from Central and West European countries (although this classification is problematic, see Lewicki, 2023), excluding the perspective of exchange students coming from Eastern European countries who often are underrepresented (Suchland, 2011). I reached out to exchange students from Poland and Rumania, however they were participating through a different exchange programme than Erasmus+ so I was not able to include them.

Fourth, I would like to mention the guidelines when writing a master thesis, limiting my time and word count. Although initially I was worried that I will be below the word count, in the end, and as I gathered such rich data, I felt that I did not have enough words. I wish, I could have explored the participants' perspective of the Norwegian culture, their engagement with it and the barriers in more depth.

Lastly, I barely explored the aspect of time when doing an exchange since it is not part of the theories I applied. I think this is an important, yet unexplored dimension, of Erasmus exchange and should be included in the future analysis.

Furthermore, the perspective of local students of the host country should be included, whether they are aware of the exchange students at their university, the activities that are offered and if the assumptions made about them do fit. It also would be interesting to investigate whether the recommendations my participants and I suggested are helpful when being implemented. This way more specific solutions could be introduced in order to enhance the engagement between Erasmus students with the culture and people of the host country. As the language seems to be one of the main barriers it would be helpful to conduct research focusing on the exchange students that do learn the language of the host country and whether this can be beneficial to enhance the interaction with local students compared to exchange students that do not learn the language.

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## 7. Appendix

### 7.1 Interview Guide

1. Introduction (Age, Country, Study programme)

2. Why did you choose to do an exchange semester?
  
3. What were your reasons for Norway, specifically Stavanger?
  - a. For how long have you been here now?
  - b. Which expectations did you have before coming here?
  
4. How has been your experience?
  - a. What kind of difficulties did you experience when coming here?
  - b. Are those still obstacles now?
  - c. What has helped you to settle in?
  - d. What can be improved?
  
5. What do you think of the Norwegian culture?
  - a. What does it mean to you? / How does it differ to your own culture?
  - b. In what ways do you engage with the Norwegian culture?
  - c. If there is engagement: What made it easy for you?
  - d. If there is no engagement: How come?
  - e. What could help to make it easier?
  
6. Could you tell me a little bit about your social life?
  - a. Who are you hanging out with? → And what brought you together?
  
7. What have you learned from your exchange so far? / What are you going to take back with you to *[insert country]*?
  
8. Is there anything you feel is missing or that you would like to add?