AN EXPLORATION OF TRANSNATIONAL POST-STUDY ABROAD NOSTALGIA AND REVISIT INTENTION AMONG TRANSNATIONAL GRADAUTES

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Abstract

While international student mobility flows increase, governments globally seek ways to attract international skilled labour for economic growth, Finland included. International university graduates are often an ''idealized'' and sought after group of this skilled labour. However, in this context, the graduates are often treated as commodities assigned to fuel local labour force. Moreover, upon graduating from their host universities, many international graduates move out of their host countries, taking their skills and labour with them. Still, because international study abroad experience is an impactful life period, the graduates continue to maintain their emotional and transnational ties towards the host country long after the graduation and exit, influencing their transnational identities and future mobility initiatives.

This thesis, through the lens of transnationalism, examines how international graduates from Jyväskylä University express their transnational identities and feelings of nostalgia towards Jyväskylä and Finland post-emigration, and if the nostalgia influences their intention to revisit Finland. Studies show that nostalgia towards a personally meaningful place and time has the potential to increase the intention to revisit there. Through purposive sampling, data was collected from five international master's student graduates who studied in Jyväskylä but had since left Finland. A synchronous, semi-structured online focus group session was arranged, and the dataset was analysed with reflexive thematic analysis resulting in three distinct themes.

The resulting themes highlighted the ways transnational graduates conceptualize their study abroad experience as nostalgic, and how keeping this nostalgic experience relevant in their current daily lives continued to construct their transnational identities. They also revealed ways how the nostalgic study abroad experience ties to their mobility aspirations. By gaining a deeper understanding of their emotional ties with their host country and intention to revisit post-emigration, universities and policymakers can develop bridge building methods and approach emigrated graduates more humanely as potential returnees or cultural ambassadors who may also promote Finland to their peers.

Keywords: Post-graduation migration, Nostalgia, Transnationalism, International Students, Transnational Students, Transnational Graduates, International Student Mobility, Higher Education Internationalization, Emigration, Repatriation, Revisit Intention, Self-Continuity, Transnational Identity, Post-Study Abroad Nostalgia

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Abstract

Opiskelijoiden kansainvälisen liikkuvuuden lisääntyessä monet eri maiden hallitukset etsivät keinoja houkutella kansainvälistä ammattitaitoista työvoimaa talouskasvun edistämiseksi, myös Suomessa. Kansainväliset korkeakoulututkinnon suorittaneet ovat usein "ihannoitu" ja haluttu osaavan työvoiman lähde. Tässä yhteydessä tutkinnon suorittaneita kohdellaan kuitenkin usein hyödykkeinä, joita käytetään paikallisen työvoiman polttoaineena. Lisäksi monet kansainvälisistä korkeakoulututkinnon suorittaneista muuttavat pois opiskelumaastaan valmistuttuaan ja näin ollen vievät osaamisensa ja työvoimansa mukanaan. Koska kansainvälinen opiskelu ulkomailla on merkityksellinen elämänvaihe, tutkinnon suorittaneet säilyttävät emotionaaliset ja monikansalliset siteensä opiskelumaata kohtaan vielä pitkään valmistumisen ja maasta poistumisen jälkeen, mikä vaikuttaa heidän monikansalliseen identiteettiinsä ja tuleviin liikkuvuusaloitteisiinsa.

Tässä pro gradu -tutkielmassa tarkastellaan transnationalismin näkökulmasta, miten Jyväskylän yliopistosta valmistuneet kansainvälisen tutkinnon suorittaneet ilmaisevat transnationaalisia identiteettejään ja nostalgian tunteita Jyväskylää ja Suomea kohtaan maastamuuton jälkeen ja vaikuttaako nostalgia heidän aikomukseensa palata Suomeen. Tutkimukset osoittavat, että nostalgia henkilökohtaisesti merkityksellistä paikkaa ja aikaa kohtaan voi lisätä aikomusta palata sinne. Harkintaotannan avulla aineisto kerättiin viideltä kansainväliseltä maisteriopiskelijalta, jotka olivat opiskelleet Jyväskylässä ja sittemmin valmistuneet ja lähteneet Suomesta. Järjestettiin synkroninen, puolistrukturoitu online-kohderyhmätilaisuus, ja aineisto analysoitiin refleksiivisen temaattisen analyysin avulla, jonka tuloksena generoitiin kolme erillistä teemaa.

Syntyneet teemat korostivat tapoja, joilla tutkinnon suorittaneet käsitteellistävät opiskelukokemuksensa nostalgiseksi, ja sitä, miten tämän nostalgisen kokemuksen pitäminen merkityksellisenä nykyisessä jokapäiväisessä elämässä jatkoi heidän transnationaalisen identiteettinsä rakentamista. Ne paljastivat myös tapoja, joilla nostalginen opiskelukokemus ulkomailla pinttyy heidän tuleviin liikkuvuusaikomuksiinsa. Yliopistojen ja poliittisten päättäjien ymmärtäessä syvällisemmin tutkinnon suorittaneiden emotionaalisia siteitä opiskelumaata kohtaan, he voivat kehittää siltojen rakentamismenetelmiä ja lähestyä maasta muuttaneita tutkinnon suorittaneita inhimillisemmin potentiaalisina paluumuuttajina tai kulttuurilähettiläinä, jotka voivat myös mainostavaa Suomea ikätovereilleen.

Keywords: kansainväliset opiskelijat, monikansalliset opiskelijat, nostalgia, monikansallisuus, korkeakoulu-opiskelijat, kansainvälinen opiskelijaliikkuvuus, korkeakoulujen kansainvälistyminen, maastamuutto, monikansallinen identiteetti

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1 INTRODUCTION

While international student mobility flows increase, governments globally seek ways to attract international skilled labour to gain economic growth and to battle national labour shortages, Finland included (Valtioneuvosto, 2023, 107). International university graduates are often an ''idealized'' and sought after group of this skilled labour: they are usually in prime employment age and have accumulated experience of the host country culture and labour market compared to migrants educated elsewhere. However, as potential skilled labour, these graduates are often obliquely dehumanized to commodities assigned to mechanically fuel the host country industries (Madge et al., 2015; Yao & Viggiano, 2019), omitting their roles as human beings with transnational ties and identities. Upon graduating from their host universities, many international graduates move out of their host countries, taking their skills and labour with them. Still, because international study abroad experience is an impactful life period involving meaningful relationships, positive memories and personal growth, the graduates continue to foster their emotional and transnational ties towards the host country and their study abroad times, shaping their transnational identities and future mobility aspirations. Nostalgia, a sentimental longing of past, fond and mostly happy, memories involving relationships with others, (Hepper et al., 2014; Sedikides et al., 2015), is one such emotional transnational bond.

This thesis is set against this background. The objective is to examine how international graduates from a Finnish university express their transnational identities and post-study nostalgia through discourse after their graduation and exit from Finland. Specifically, the influence of the graduates' nostalgic feelings on their intention to revisit or promote Finland is of interest. I argue that gaining a better understanding of such emotional and transnational post-study abroad bonds is relevant when building a more humane understanding of the mobile and transnational lives of the graduates, which could benefit international talent seekers in attracting skilled immigrants. Gaining a deeper understanding of their motives, emotional ties with their host country and revisit intention post-emigration, universities, alumni associations and

policymakers can utilize and develop better methods to build bridges and approach the graduates even as potential returnees. Drawing from transnationalism, international student mobility and nostalgia literature, international graduates in this thesis are conceptualized as ''transnational'' graduates, highlighting their complex, subjective and continued process of identity formation, decision-making, exchanges and ties across national borders post-emigration.

Despite the growing body of literature on International Student Mobility (ISM) trajectories, the studies on returning international graduates are lacking (Pham, 2020). The studies that do focus on post-graduation migration often highlight readaptation (Le & LaCost, 2017) and career challenges (Lin, 2023; Tharenou, 2015) of the graduates back in the home country. As it is, recent studies advocate to abandon the graduates' roles as mere free agents with no mobile subjectivities (Geddie, 2013) and market-driven actors of financial capital (Madge et al., 2015); coming from various backgrounds, the voices, preferences, motivations and experiences of the international students themselves should gain more qualitative emphasis in research (Bordia et al. 2019; Page & Chahboun, 2019). The ISM studies frequently assume international graduates return ''home'' after graduation from a narrow nationalistic perspective, when, in reality, the graduates themselves may remain mobile and conceptualize home in multiple ways (Wu and Wilkes, 2017) in a world where ''return'' and ''homelands'' are not always static concepts (King et al., 2011). The graduates might feel connected to multiple geographically distant places and times simultaneously. These retheorizations offer fresh directions to research the contextual lives and sense-making of transnational graduates, placing them in subjective transnational framework.

Moreover, nostalgia, a social emotion of sentimental longing for the past, can be conceptualized as a pancultural (Hepper at al., 2014) and transnational (Tsapovsky & Frosh, 2015) universal emotion felt towards a geographically distant place. It is usually triggered in people when reminiscing a past meaningful event involving social interactions (Wildschut et al., 2006). Further, nostalgia felt towards a personally meaningful place and time has the potential to increase the intention to revisit there (Lu et al., 2022). While this setting has been studied in international exchange students (Cho et al. 2021), there is little academic attention in post-study abroad nostalgia influencing the revisit intention to the host country of (transnational) university graduates specifically. Especially how governments and international talent-seekers could benefit from understanding nostalgia-mediated revisit intention could be further expanded upon.

In addition to the above-mentioned rationales and gaps, my own positionality also influenced my interest to study these specific topics. As I have professional background in consulting global mobility of people, I have gained deeper insight of guiding international talent to Finland. It has helped me understand international mobility as a multifaceted transnational process involving different emotions. As an example from my work, a foreign couple set to move to Finland once expressed how during

their Finland pre-visit, they had decided not to accept the job offer and relocate due to their bond towards their home country. A supposedly simple act of relocation revealed to involve emotionality that had influenced the migration intention. I also witnessed first-hand how international mobility impacts near family members too, helping me realize the human elements and relationships of international mobility. In addition, as I have been an exchange student in a foreign country myself, I am aware of the shared experiences and emotions that surface not only during but also after the studies and leaving the host country. Me and my former exchange student friends often find ourselves nostalgizing about the places and the people related to the study abroad experience in the host country, which inspires us to revisit there in the future. Finally, and perhaps obviously, me being a student of a humanistic field drives me to discover the human side of societal questions, as I believe it can help construct a more functional understanding of reality. These experiences have shaped my perspective to situate myself within the mobility field. I offer more methodological reflections and positionality in the methodology chapter of this thesis.

This qualitative focus group study positioned in contextualism and transnationalism employs reflexive thematic analysis method to know more about how transnational master's student graduates from Jyväskylä University express their transnational identities and feelings of nostalgia towards Jyväskylä and Finland post-emigration. Simultaneously, I aim to contribute to international student mobility and post-migration fields. To guide the study process, I present and aim to answer to the following research questions:

RQ 1: How do transnational university graduates from Jyväskylä University perceive their study-abroad experience post-emigration?

RQ 2: In what ways do they express transnational post-study abroad nostalgia in their present lives?

RQ 3: How do their perception of the nostalgic study abroad experience and transnational ties influence their mobility aspirations?

This thesis is organized into six chapters. Chapter two reviews nostalgia, international student mobility (ISM) and transnationalism literature to situate this thesis within the academic context. Chapter three introduces and rationalizes the research methodology and describes the detailed analysis process. Chapter four presents the findings: the themes generated by the reflexive thematic analysis and their significance in relation to answering the research questions. Chapter five is reserved for the discussion of the results, and finally in chapter six I draw my conclusions, along with practical and theoretical contributions, limitations, future research recommendations and personal takeaways.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

For conceptual and contextual clarity, this chapter will introduce and define some key concepts used in this research. An overview of existing literature and scholarly work related to international student mobility, transnationalism and graduates and their relation to nostalgia and revisit intention is provided. It also opens the door for identifying and reasoning the research gaps. International student research, and thus international graduate research, is an interdisciplinary subfield, which implies engagement with versatile literature across disciplines (Mitterlmeier et al., 2024, 23). In the following chapters, the concepts and their conceptualizations will be discussed in more detail while situating this thesis within the boarder academic context.

2.1 Transnational Graduates

Outside its history in international economic cooperation, globalization, a megatrend, can be conceptualized as a process or a state where flow of people, ideas, and resources interconnect and are exchanged transnationally across national borders (Appadurai, 1990). While not necessarily exclusively a global phenomenon due to the world's uneven social and economic interconnectedness (Mufwene, 2010; Pieterse, 2000), globalization is often understood as an increased transnational mobility of people (Appadurai, 1990), especially of the global elite, because mobility involves inequalities related to status and rights (Heyman & Campbell, 2009). Higher education students, those enrolled in tertiary educational institutes and who have the financial means to travel, are among these mobile people. Indeed, the number of total inbound internationally mobile students in the world steadily rose from 5 416 030 students to 6 440 413 between 2017 – 2022 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2024). These international students embark on studying in a foreign country for personal and external reasons and motivations. Unfavourable home country conditions, host university prestige, pursuit for happiness (grass is greener on the other side) or professional and

cultural growth are among the main motivational drivers (Gutema et al. 2024). The Internationalization in higher education institutions enables research universities to host international students and offer international education degrees in the global language of science English, *a lingua franca* (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). Therefore, international student mobility, ISM, has become more convenient, normalized and accessible for tertiary education students.

2.1.1 Conceptualization

Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD, defines international students as those who '' left their country of origin and moved to another country for the purpose of study'' (OECD, 2024, 238). Further, OECD defines a graduate as an individual who has completed an education programme successfully by demonstrating knowledge acquisition to the education institute, usually by accumulating enough recognized study credits (OECD, 2017, 36). Thus, international graduates are international students who have completed their studies by accumulating enough study credentials in an educational institute in a country they are not nationals of. While this can be done remotely without physically exiting the home residence country by attending online programs (de Wit & Altbach, 2021), my focus will be on those who physically lived in their host countries during their studies. During their sojourn, the international students form social networks and immerse themselves in the host country environment, which serves as the contextual springboard for this thesis.

However, the above-mentioned definitions and the ISM literature in general often rely on broad conventional definitions of international students that omit their complex, subjective and, above-all, human identities and experiences spanning geographical distances (Mittelmeier et al., 2024, 11-12; 17). As Bennett et al. argue (Mittelmeier et al., 2024, 12), the majority of existing studies on international students so far tend to label the students problematically in limited nationality-based definitions, tying them to dichotomic representators of their ''home'' countries. As a response to this, scholars of higher education have recently attempted to broaden the theorization (Findlay et al. 2012) and the conceptualization (Madge et al., 2015) of international students and their mobility. They have geared towards more holistic and personal processes involving complex transnational engagements, social ties and actions (Geddie, 2013) taken not just before or during, but also after the international studies have been completed (Pham, 2020). As it is, some scholars have shifted the definition from an international student to a transnational student (Cinkara & Yüksel, 2024).

While there are multiple ways to define transnationalism, it can be understood as a component of globalization that highlights people's cross-border activities and behaviour that influence their identity and sense of belonging (Tedeschi et al., 2022); a sense of self shaped by and exists across many national or cultural contexts. Park (2017) argues that transnationalism must be understood as an interdiscursive process: when making sense of their transnational lives, migrants discuss the places they have

been to, and thus insert discourses from those places, such as national, cultural or social, into their current discourse. This implies that these discourses are rooted in concrete past itinerary time-spaces. The term transnational, then, based on the above-mentioned definitions, emphasizes graduates' continued process of identity formation, decision-making, exchanges, sense of belonging and ties across national borders post-emigration from the host country. It highlights their social interconnectedness in a global space.

As transnational individuals coming from versatile cultural and national backgrounds, the voices, preferences, motivations and experiences of the students themselves should gain more qualitative emphasis in research (Mittelmeier et al., 2024; Bordia et al. 2019; Page & Chahboun, 2019). Simultaneously, recognizing the emotionally embedded relationships and roles in international study is crucial (Madge et al. 2015); the globalization of student flows cannot be isolated from wider mobility trajectories both before and after study (Findlay et al. 2012). As it is, international students who have graduated and exited their host countries lack academic attention (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Lee, 2022; Pham, 2020). These conceptualizations and calls for research lay the ground for my rationale to study the experiences of transnational graduates after their departure from the host country in particular; an often-marginalized demographic in ISM studies. Learning and studying the motivations and transnational ties of transnational graduates would open new doors for understanding their decision-making and its larger socio-economic consequences on a national and international scale. I will refer to my study demographic as transnational graduates hereinafter: to acknowledge their connections between distant places, and to utilize academically up-to-date terminology.

Since studying and obtaining a degree abroad can be considered a socially rich, transnational life occasion, transnational graduates absorb unique characteristics and skills from their study abroad experience (Gu & Schwesfurth, 2015). These may involve increased intercultural awareness and sensitivity (Gill, 2010; Gu et al., 2010), and networking and international bridge building skills (Krannich & Hunger, 2022). Transnational graduates balance between the pros and cons of lifestyle vs. working in the home or host country (Tharenou, 2015). During their studies, the graduates form diverse friendship networks with other transnational students and the local students, increasing their sense of social connectedness (Hendrickson et al., 2011). In addition, they may usually prefer internationally mobile jobs in their professional lives (Findlay et al. 2012; Wiers-Jenssen, 2013).

Within the context of this thesis, and supported by above-mentioned rationales, I conceptualize transnational graduates as higher education students who attended a tertiary educational institute physically in a host country. They have subsequently graduated and physically exited the host country. As such, they possess transnational networking and cultural sensitivity skills, and experience social connectedness across

geographical borders. They are also likely to remain transnationally mobile in their professional lives.

2.1.2 Graduates as Skilled Labor

Governments compete to attract labour immigrants for economic growth (Xuan, 2023). Immigrants take many roles (as workers, students, taxpayers…) and thus influence the host economy from various points, such as investment priorities, human capital, knowledge transfer or innovation (OECD, 2018, 19). In the United States, immigration may help battle slow national productivity and labour shortages (Orrenius et al., 2020). The European Union (2024) encourages migration into the EU markets to respond to labour shortages and to boost economic growth. From Finland's perspective, the current government programme states that Finland's lack of skilled labour places challenges to the economy and future (Valtioneuvosto, 2023, 107). The Finnish government aims to invest in ''international recruitment'' while fostering ''economic growth'' because ''labour immigration is one of the measures to achieve the Government's employment target''. Especially high-skilled immigrants are the main target demographic for the governments. They usually earn more and pay higher taxes. Thus, from a fiscal standpoint, they contribute more to the economic growth than the low skilled immigrants (Borjas, 2019; Oliinyk et al., 2021). However, the direct link between national economic growth and immigration still remains relatively underexamined academically and the existing literature offers varied results (Borjas, 2019). Regardless, permanent migration has been found to increase economic growth and productivity to some degree in OECD countries (Boubtane et al., 2016; OECD, 2018), when measured in a sector-centred manner.

Governments usually treat transnational students (and later, graduates) often as an idealized group of new skilled labour in the host country, if they choose to remain upon graduating. For example, the Advisory Panel on Canada's International Strategy (2012, 14) highlights transnational students as ''an excellent source of highly qualified and skilled persons'' to fill the talent gaps to meet labour market needs. In addition, the European Union aims to keep international graduates in the EU and guide them to work by reducing the working life entrance obstacles (EPRS, 2021, 57). Through their studies, the students acquire and bring knowledge and skills. They are also in prime employment age and are usually familiar with the host country bureaucratic processes, customs, and culture (OECD, 2024: 229) compared to migrants educated elsewhere. Therefore, countries seek ways to lure mobile students for economic benefits they can bring with them (OECD, 2024, 229).

Transnational students bring research skills, productivity and economic growth (Yao & Viggiano, 2019) especially in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields (STEM) (Orrenius et al., 2020; Peri et al., 2015). Transnational students have been found to improve the total factor productivity in China (Zhong et al., 2023). From the perspectives of the transnational graduates themselves, they believe to positively

contribute to the societal development of their host or home countries through the employment opportunities gained from their international education experience (Nachatar & Jamil, 2021). Indeed, host universities have the potential role to lead more international students to local entrepreneurship economy more effectively upon graduation (Gragam & Pottie-Sherman, 2022).

While countries compete to attract skilled labour, some problematic topics are worth addressing. First, the national policies to attract international students the governments implement often neglect the human side of talent mobility (Mosneaga & Winther, 2013). International students should not be measured merely as market-driven financial and human capital (Madge et al., 2015) because their complex social ties, like families, need to be considered too in a successful settlement to a host country. Transnational students get easily dehumanized into mere tools that benefit the state (Yao & Viggiano, 2019). Second, the Western-centred approach of this trend and the angle of this thesis ignore the caused social inequalities. Shaw et al. (2011, 117) describe the migration of the highly skilled as ''controversial and difficult'' subject. Many Western governments compete to attract international talent often from developing countries. As a result, developing countries lose their most talented contributors, which hinders their social and economic progress, as is the case in China (Yang, 2020), which fosters inequality. This phenomenon is also referred to as brain drain (Bhardwaj & Sharma, 2023). Third, despite the governments actively seeking ways to attract highly skilled international talent, in practice many high skilled immigrants and graduates struggle to find work in the host country labour market. The host country employers might undervalue transnational graduates' skills, decreasing their employability (Cameron et al., 2019). In Finland, the legal regime may hinder and restrain the competencies of highly educated migrants and student migrants and label them as subordinary, forcing them to spend years in jobs that are inferior to their actual competencies (Ndomo, 2024).

2.2 Life After Graduation – Returning ''Home''

The post-graduate migration studies remain relatively limited (Wu & Wilkes, 2017). Upon completing their studies in the host country, as non-nationals, transnational graduates often need to make their next mobility decisions: where do they intend to live? While ISM studies often describe how transnational graduates return ''home'' or to ''homeland'' (Pham, 2020; Gu & Schwefurth, 2015), they neglect to offer detailed definitions, the subjectivities and transnational implications of these concepts. As King et al. argue (2011), the evolving global migration field where homelands do not necessarily remain static shatters the simplified ''binaries of home/abroad'' and ''migration/return''. Besides, some transnational graduates might enter and start residing in a third country directly after exiting the host country, or start considering the host

country as a new, second home. To complicate the matter more, studies label these mobile graduates often as ''returnees'' (Tran & Bui, 2021; Zhai & Gao, 2021; Bahna 2021; Lin, 2023; Pham, 2020) but sometimes as ''repatriates'' as well (Tharenou, 2015; Le & LaCost, 2017; Singh, 2020) despite these labels involving different connotations.

Because my study demographic is transnational graduates who have made their mobility decision and who no longer live in the host country, these problematizations of home, post-graduate migration and the act of return call for conceptual clarity. To gain it, I will briefly review how transnational students understand the concept of home, and their transnational relationship with the host country post-exit. I also review the meaning of return and repatriation and offer my own conceptualization of post-graduate migration. The point is not to list reasons why transnational graduates exit the host country or return to the home country (the push-pull factors (Toren, 1979)), but rather to review where do they move to and how they make sense of it.

Return migration studies have evolved from a simple model of moving to a destination and returning, to a nuanced theorization of return involving multifaceted understandings of what space and time can mean and to whom (King et al., 2011). Reflecting upon this argument, at the time of graduation, transnational graduates arrive at a mental crossroad of transitional life stage. As Geddie postulates (2013), international students navigate their transnational social and family ties, which affects their future mobility and residency, pulling them to multiple geographic directions upon graduation. For example, a Malaysian man was studying in the United Kingdom and his Malaysian wife was studying in the United States, but they considered finding work together in a third country, Australia, upon completing their studies (Geddie, 2013). In the United States context, few non-native students enter the country with the intention to settle permanently, but the decision to stay might be later shaped by family and career prospects (Hazen & Alberts, 2006). Similarly, in a survey study of over 3000 international students in the United Kingdom, 20% of the respondents planned to live in a third country right after graduation (Packwood et al., 2015). These examples challenge the binary simplicity of mechanical ''return home or stay'' mobility paradigm that is often employed on transnational student and graduate mobility trajectories.

Due to these diverse backgrounds, mobility plans and lives, transnational students rationalize home in complex ways. Wu and Wilkes (2017) categorized four ways how transnational students perceive home: thinking home as host, as ancestral, as cosmopolitan, or as nebulous. For example, understanding home as cosmopolitan, the student feels home is in multiple places; alternatively by understanding home as ancestral, the student thinks home is where they are from. Because home is a subjective concept in flux, it applies to one's ''homeland'' too, and the graduates may constantly renegotiate its meaning. International students may rely on social media channels (Dwyer et al. 2021) as an anchor to maintain connections and networks with home and peers, complexifying the heterogeneity of back home vs. out here. This renegotiation

of home will further influence the future mobility plans: to stay, return or have the mobility plans open (Wu and Wilker, 2017). Some graduates might become circular migrants who remain mobile between home and host countries due to their established professional networks (Krannich & Hunger, 2022) because they may prefer internationally mobile jobs (Findlay et al. 2012; Wiers-Jenssen, 2013). This creates a transnational sense of being home in more than one place, making the act of ''return'' multilayered (return from the return (King et al., 2011)). The very definition of return as an act exceeds physical dimensions: return can be virtual or imagined. It can also be fluid, where an initially temporary *return visit* spanning couple of months might become a permanent stay (King et al., 2011).

After exiting, transnational graduates often maintain a positive attitude towards the host country (Hong et al., 2020). They might do so by keeping in touch with the technology updates of the host country markets (Saxenian, 2005), for example. The ''reverse transnationalism'' refers to maintaining border-crossing connections (social, cultural, political…) to the host country after exiting, which signifies how returnees do not end their transnational relationships and mobility trajectories post-return (Tedeschi et al., 2022).

Some studies label home-returned international graduates as repatriates. Broadly speaking, repatriation refers to the act of returning to one's country of origin. It is often forced in nature (King et al. 2011), historically associated with forceful relocation initiatives of refugees (Popowycz, 2022). The term consists of *re*, return, and *patria*, homeland. Oxford English Dictionary describes it as ''The return or restoration of a person'' or ''money, historical artefacts, etc.,'' to ''native country'' or ''to their country of origin'' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023), which implies that repatriation is a binary process (host-home), occurs transnationally and any person or object can repatriate. Repatriation studies are often associated with expatriation (Knocke & Schuster, 2017): mobility of the global elite, either assigned or self-initiated with a goal to fulfil contractual obligations abroad in the context of globalized businesses. While comparisons can be drawn between corporate repatriates and transnational graduates, I argue the term is problematic and a bit of a misnomer when used to label transnational graduates who have left the host country. The crux of repatriation implies an individual returns to their ''homeland'' that is a term limited within nationalism. Transnational graduates do not always migrate only between two countries, as evidenced.

Therefore, while the philosophical and ontological implications of home, return, repatriation and transnationalism offer ample food for thought, I will refrain from further pondering in order to limit the scope of this thesis to the conceptualization relevant to my focus. As such, I label transnational graduates who have left their host country as 'emigrated'. This label frees them from conceptual contradictions of the subjectivities of home and return and emphasizes their physical departure from a country. The spatiotemporal distance from the host country then implies the

graduates view their host country lives positively through transnational lens and ties. Simultaneously, the label 'emigrated' does not lock the location where the international graduates move *to*, because they can start residing and building their lives in a third country as well, not just in their ''home'' countries.

2.3 Nostalgia

Originating from the Greek words *nostos*, return to one´s homeland, and *algos*, pain, the term nostalgia was deemed as homesickness resulting from physical distance (Routledge, 2016, 4). In academic research, however, it was not until 1688 when Johannes Hofer, a medical student based in University of Basel, conceptualized nostalgia with a clinical description including physical and emotional symptoms caused by longing for one's homeland (Martin, 1954). For a long time, the understanding of nostalgia remained and was treated as such: a bodily disease; however, entering the 20th century, it began to incipiently separate from the concept of homesickness, from the medical field to psychology as a complex mental disorder (Routledge, 2016, 5). From the psychoanalysis perspective, Fodor (1950) did not view nostalgia as a mental illness per se, but argued it could potentially develop into an obsessive mental state causing severe unhappiness.

By the second half of the 20th century, however, nostalgia's nuanced qualities in emotional well-being, behaviour and identity began to gain academic recognition, especially in sociology studies. Fred Davis, a sociologist, conceptualized nostalgia as a ''social emotion'': as a reflexive method for utilizing lived past experiences to cope with both collective and personal, potentially anxiety-filled, life change or transition periods in the present (Fine, G. A. 1980; Panelas, T. 1982). Social research revealed how older family members cherished objects of contemplation, such as photographs, over objects of action and enjoyment in their households (Schudson, 1983). In marketing studies (Havlena, 1991; Baker & Kennedy 1994), people trusted and favoured products and ads that evoked personally meaningful nostalgic fantasies in them. Principal components analysis demonstrated the emotional components of nostalgic experiences to be mostly positive ones: warmth, joy and affection (Holak & Havlena, 1998).

Today, the Oxford English Dictionary (2024) defines nostalgia as "a sentimental longing'' for of a period of the past. Throughout the years, its concept has transformed into a wide and normal, often psychologically beneficial and positive, yet bittersweet emotional experience and resource, where the ''sweet'' outweighs the ''bitter''. Psychology scholars today adopt nostalgia as a social emotion with benefits in emotional well-being: for example, nostalgia curbs loneliness in highly resilient individuals by restoring their social connectedness (Zhou et al. 2008). Nostalgia is a universal experience across cultures (Hepper et al., 2024). Participants from 18 countries demonstrated mutual understanding of nostalgia as remembering past, personally meaningful fond

and happy memories, often involving relationships with others, demonstrating its pancultural lay conceptions (Hepper et al., 2014). It is important to note that nostalgia is different from similar traits like reminiscing or rumination; nostalgia involves more emotionality (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2024).

There are some scholarly discussions on whether nostalgia as an emotion may be unhealthy, especially when experienced over daily life (Newman et al. 2020). Individuals who chronically worry experience anxiety and depression when engaging with nostalgia, indicating nostalgia's bitter side in mental time travel to the past (Verplanken, 2012). Some also criticize its wide-ranging applicability. Becker (2018) refers to nostalgia as a ''master narrative'' that describes any form of engagement with the past and calls for more careful and critical research how people make sense of their past by clarifying who is actually nostalgic for what and why. Despite, or precisely because of, the sometimes contradictory and multifaceted understandings and approaches towards nostalgia, there is no denying in its universality and its role in driving behavioural intentions. Nevertheless, this complexity requires its conceptualization to be precise, if one desires to yield meaningful and accurate research results.

2.3.1 Social Interaction and Transnational Nostalgia

What triggers the sensation of nostalgia in people? The triggers vary across external, internal, inter- and intrapersonal stimuli, like smells, objects, tastes, stories, loneliness or boredom (Sedikides et al., 2015). It can be triggered by meaningful phenomena from one's lived past, such as recalling a momentous life event (Wildschut et al., 2006): older people favour popular music that was trendy during their early adulthood because it could be associated with emotionally powerful life events, "rites of passages" (Holbrook & Schindler, 1989). As a social emotion, however, nostalgia is triggered often during social situations, such as conversations with friends or reminiscing together (Wildschut, 2006). Indeed, in their pivotal study on nostalgia triggers, Wildschut et al. (2006) found that 24% of the 172 participants identified social interactions as a key trigger for nostalgic feelings. (''meeting up with people who were there'' to discuss ''what happened and laughing/crying about it''). Social interaction (gatherings, community events) as a trigger for nostalgia was later found to be just as evident in a large-scale international cross-cultural nostalgia study involving participants form 28 countries from five continents (Hepper at al., 2024).

Deriving from previous literature, Cho et al., (2014) classify nostalgia into four groups: nostalgia as an experience, as socialization, as personal identity and as group identity; nostalgia as socialization is triggered when reminiscing positive socialization experiences with one's group members. Nostalgia, then, has interpersonal aspects and arises from ''being in presence of the people concerned'' (Wildschut et al., 2006). As such, nostalgic feelings may surface when identifying oneself as belonging or socially interacting with a group with a past shared experience, be it a sports fans travel group (Fairley, 2003) or socialist past of a nation (Velikonja, 2009) for example. These social

groups can be considered as imagined communities. Anderson (1991, 6) defines a nation as an imagined community because despite the fact how it is impossible for all the members of even a small nation to know or relate to most of their fellow-members, people still feel a sense of horizontal communion and shared identity. I argue that the same construct applies to transnational graduates of a university because students often experience sense of belonging and communion towards their university, alumni engagement and peers (Drezner & Pizmony-Levy, 2021; Green et al., 2021), when, in reality, they can't personally know all the graduates from the university.

Nostalgic yearning can also be directed to geographically remote space. Transnational Croatian-Australian families (Skrbis, 2008) and Italian migrants living in Australia (Baldassar, 2008) expressed nostalgia for an imaginatively constructed home across geographical borders. Repatriates experience nostalgia for their time in the host country, which has been found to ease the repatriation adjustment process after returning home (Zou et al. 2018); repatriates may associate time spent in host country with sentimental longing. Similarly, refugees too experience nostalgia for their former home countries and communities (Aksu & Trix, 2021), through music and food for example, when re-establishing their livelihoods (Suzuki, 2021). This makes nostalgia also a transnational emotion (Tsapovsky & Frosh, 2015). After all, transnational migration is an emotionally charged phenomenon where emotions evolve and are on the move ''between homes'' (Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015).

2.3.2 Nostalgia, Transnational Graduates and Revisit Intention

Nostalgia's influence on identity, behaviour, mood and social connectedness have been studied e.g. in food consumption (Simpson & Lee, 2024); travel and virtual tourism (Shin & Jeong, 2022) and mediascapes (Thurnell-Read, 2022). In international student mobility studies, nostalgia for the home country often functions as a pull factor when students decide to repatriate upon graduation (Woo, 2023). On the contrary, nostalgia is also experienced towards the host country and study-abroad times after the emigration. This is because university study period is a socially meaningful and memorable life transition experience involving social connectedness (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Janke et al., 2022). These social and memorable aspects of an experience positively influence nostalgia (Triantafillidou & Siomkos, 2013)

Feeling nostalgic towards a host country can increase the intention to revisit there. Previous research on international study and nostalgia implies how the nostalgic and positive study experiences positively affect international exchange students' revisit intention to the host country (Cho et al. 2021). Nostalgic motives and positive memories attract people to visit travel destinations (Leong et al. 2015). Nostalgia's indirect positive effect on the intention to revisit a space or location is more evidenced in tourism studies (Lu et al., 2022), more specifically in sport tourism studies (Chiu et al., 2023; Takata & Hallman, 2022), also in revisiting a summer campsite that offers memorable experiences (Triantafillidou & Siomkos, 2013). It is evident also in

destination loyalty (the willingness to revisit a destination): a positive and meaningful international study experience positively impacts destination loyalty towards the host country (Yang et al., 2024). In addition, during a disrupted mobility trajectory, international students who are forced to temporarily stay in their home countries express feelings of uncertainty, which triggers nostalgia towards their host country, making them want to continue and complete their lives and roles there (Phan et al. 2023). Nostalgia is not necessarily felt towards a physical destination, but it can be felt for the travel experience itself, involving people and events (Fairley, 2003).

Nostalgia and revisit intention are also closely related to self-continuity. Self-continuity refers to the psychological subjective sense, feeling or judgement that mentally connects the present self with the past or future selves to construct coherent self-concept (Sedikides et al. 2023). Those with high self-continuity feel as they are the same person as they always were throughout different life stages and circumstances, making them maintain stable life trajectory and sense of identity and feel grounded in life experiences. On the contrary, those with high self-discontinuity may feel aliented from their past or future self-perceptions. Psychology researchers have subesquently distinquished three definitions for self-continuity: past-present self-continuity, present-future self-continuity and past-present-future self-continuity, also referred to as global self-continuity (Sedikides et al. 2023). Global and past-present self-continuity are closely related to nostalgia. Nostalgia instigates and boosts past-present self-continuity by bringing social and momentous life event to mind, creating a sense of continuous and social life trajectory (Sedikides et al., 2023). Nostalgia elevates global self-continuity because nostalgizing often links the past with the present and potential future plans (Sedikides et al., 2023). Especially past-present self-continuity generated by nostalgic feeling affects intention potential (Sedikides et al., 2023).

Putting it all together, studies on nostalgia and intention for future visit have been consistent in suggesting that nostalgic memories of the past influence the present behaviour and decision-making (Sedikides et al., 2015). This thesis approaches nostalgia as a subjective, transnational and social emotion that influences the decision-making process. It is expressed through interdiscursive rhetoric: when emigrated graduates reminisce about their fond host country and student experiences and feel nostalgic, they may find themselves being attached to that place and time. This sense of attachment would then further motivate them to seek similar positive experiences in the future, indicating nostalgia's influence in revisit intention to a destination and reinforcing positive reputation for the host country and university. Emigrated graduates identify with belonging to transnational imagined communities because their identities are influenced and constructed across national borders partly by the perceived transnational nostalgia felt towards the host country. This transnational belonging reinforces their sense of communion with each other, which triggers nostalgic feelings in them. Nostalgia, therefore, becomes a key emotional tie linking the graduates' present lives to their past student lives in a foreign country.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I rationalize and explain the specific scientific methods chosen for this study. Research is a process where the researcher is expected to position themselves in theoretic net, to make decisions and use specific tools and frameworks that guide them towards the research goal: to provide answers to the research questions. The methodology serves as an umbrella for choosing the complementing paradigm, tools and methods to gather, understand and analyse data, which impacts the research results. As such, the chosen methodology needs to be reasoned.

3.1 Study Approach – Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

To investigate the expressions of transnational ties and nostalgia for their student life period of emigrated graduates, and its influence on revisit intention, I adopted a qualitative research approach. Especially applied in social sciences, qualitative research involves techniques to explore how the human experience is: to dig beneath the surface to locate a deeper, contextual truth (Lincoln, 2021, 3). As opposed to quantitative research that yields numerically measured and valued research results that can be easily replicated, qualitative research focuses more on discovering the subtle, contextualized subjectivities of the human experience that usually bypass generalizations. In other words, the results of this thesis are unlikely to be exactly similar in other similar studies that investigate nostalgia, graduates and revisit intention. In this thesis, qualitative approach is justified as I aim to access the personal stories, experiences and perceptions of the study participants; how they construct and reason their worlds and identities through discourse. Also, in their content analysis of recent most cited transnationalism publications, Tedeschi et al., argue that studies on transnationalism often lean towards qualitative analysis (Tedeschi et al., 2022), which I will follow as well.

Positioning oneself within specific meta level philosophical theories (Big Theory) lays a ''conceptual basis'' for a research project (Braun & Clarke, 2022, 163). All

research involves theoretical assumptions of the world and knowledge and how they function, even if the researcher deliberately denies it. The theories offer research frameworks and toolsets that consist of assumptions and sets of beliefs about the world and knowledge that guide the scientific process. In other words, following specific epistemology (questions related to valid knowledge and its production) and ontology (nature of being) theories help limit data investigation and interpretation processes and angles. What theories to choose depends on the research question(s), the nature of the knowledge that is aimed to be produced and the relationship between the research participants and the researcher.

I choose to study the topic from a contextualist epistemological standpoint. Contextualism assumes that language and meaning are context-dependent (Braun & Clarke, 2022, 178-179). Humans are always living in specific contexts, deriving meaning from them. Therefore, humans cannot be meaningfully studied in a vacuum, isolated from the contexts surrounding them. In contextualism, rather than valuing the accuracy of knowledge, the utility of it is more of significance because contextualism assumes the existence of multiple accounts of reality with different levels of persuasiveness. The research results are dependent on the context surrounding the research. Nevertheless, the research can reveal something about the liminal ''truth'' and the logic of social practices beneath the surface. This places contextualism ''in between'' postpositivist and constructionist epistemologies. Based on previous research, nostalgia is a universal (Hepper et al., 2024) and ''real'' emotion; however, it is also complex, and different things can be differently nostalgic to people in different life stages and settings. Therefore, contextualist assumption aligns with this study on nostalgia: to acknowledge the subjectivities and the context-sensitivity that construct a nostalgic experience in people. Contextualism offers a viewpoint to investigate how the research participants use discourse to describe nostalgic experiences in different settings they are currently at.

For the data analysis tool in this thesis, I selected reflexive thematic analysis. While there are various ways to approach TA, I follow the approach of Braun and Clarke (2022). Braun and Clarke define a reflexive TA: a type of TA where the reflexivity and the active role of the researcher during the analysis process leads to creative interpretations of the data. The reflexivity of this TA approach requires the researcher to rigorously acknowledge their philosophical and personal positionality, to be *reflexive*. Reflexive TA abandons the idea of the researcher as a neutral conduit of information (Braun & Clarke, 2022, 14-15). Nobody can have a pure and neutral worldview without any influence from social peers, occupation or politics for example. The reflexivity influences how to make sense of the data. Therefore, throughout the study, I acknowledged my position as a researcher and my possible subconscious motives. For example, I often want to exhibit a positive image of Finland to foreigners. Thus, there is a possibility I emphasize and listen to good experiences from Finland more over negative ones. As someone who has personally studied and lived abroad, I also

reflected on my own role not only as a current university student but also as a former transnational student too. From my standpoint, I therefore share commonalities with the recipients, allowing me to build rapport, but also limiting the scope of my researcher lens. During the course of this thesis, I take nostalgia as a prerequisite, a common human emotion, which could lead me to prioritize themes aligned with my expectations.

There are range of ways to conduct reflexive TA. The process and the orientation towards the data can be more essentialist or constructionist, more semantic or latent, more inductive or deductive, more experimental or critical (Braun & Clarke, 2022, 9-10). Important to know is that these orientations are not mutually exclusive; they exist on a spectrum. This also highlights the active and flexible role of the researcher. As for the interpretation of the language itself, I tend to lean more on latent analysis. Latent coding catches underlying meanings and concepts beyond the surface level of words. One can express feeling characteristics of nostalgia without explicitly stating they feel ''nostalgic''; nostalgia encapsulates various circumstances and emotions. Furthermore, language is a tool for communicating meaning. Through their voices and words, the research participants rationalize and share something about their thoughts and feelings. The way language and its use are conceptualized, thus, shapes the legitimacy of the claims extracted from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022, 165). To guide the language conceptualization, Braun & Clarke posit that the theory of language can be understood as intentional: to convey the speaker's distinct and subjective reality and perspectives because people understand things uniquely (Braun & Clarke, 2022, 164). In understanding language as intentional, universal meanings of things are not in the limelight; instead, meaning of what is real or true is constructed subjectively by each person. I aim to conceptualize language as intentional in my analysis.

Therefore, by adapting an experimental reflexive TA orientation within contextual epistemology, I can flexibly apply transnational theoretical framework over the analysis process. The subjective nature of the experimental TA fits with studying the interdiscursive expressions of nostalgic experiences of transnational graduates.

3.2 Data Collection – Focus Groups

Data collection refers to the process of gathering information relevant to the present research question. It is conducted with a specific data collection method, which is followed by analysis and interpretation of the collected data. As for the data collection of this thesis, I moderated an online focus group session.

In simple terms, focus groups are group discussions guided by a moderator, allowing for first-hand real-time contact with the participants. They are widely used in qualitative social science research to collect rich data and insights from the participants. Focus groups are useful when generating deeper level rationales of participants

who are subjected to similar experience (Carey, 2016, 16-17). Compared to other methods, well facilitated focus groups lead to engaging stories and discussion through open-ended questions. While focus groups can usually be informal, flexible and relaxed in nature, the moderator nevertheless guides the discussion to prevent the relevant topics from drifting astray. The moderator engages, ensures the comfort of the participants and offers encouraging comments to maintain involvement of all participants equally, while simultaneously remaining nonjudgemental.

3.2.1 Online Focus Groups

The rise of information technology and Internet accessibility has made it possible to arrange and moderate focus groups on an online environment. Steward and Shamdasani (2017) define a synchronous online focus group style. They resemble the traditional face-to-face focus groups the most because involve real-time discussions though video group chats lead by a moderator. The real-time online interactions offer a decent degree of reliability in an often-informal setting and, thus, can lead to rich participation.

Arranging a synchronous online focus group involves several advantages over in-person one. Online focus groups are not limited to a physical location, offering flexible scheduling. They provide a way to group diverse participants, which would otherwise be challenging due to geographical restrictions. While the in-person focus groups produce significantly higher volume of words, online focus groups tend to be more efficient in generating more ideas per words, in comparison (Richard et al., 2021). However overall, when it comes to the uniqueness of the generated ideas and themes, in-person and online focus groups are equal.

The disadvantages of online focus groups may include limited non-verbal communication cues, and reduced group intimacy, which somewhat constrains the communication and data generation (Carey, 2016, 20). As such, Steward and Shamdasani (2017) recommend limiting the research participants up to eight. Accessing the Internet requires technology and tools that may not be readily available to everyone, especially in poorer regions. However, an established bandwidth and rapid developments in IT technology have fixed some of these problems. Also, the use of physical sensory stimuli, such as objects, smells and taste is not possible in an online setting.

Much like in face-to-face focus groups, the proactive role of the moderator is important in online focus groups, too. Too many questions may result in short answers, which can unintentionally transform the online focus group session into an online survey (Steward & Shamdasani, 2017). As Steward and Shamdasani suggest, the moderator should limit the number of questions from 12 to 15. A high-quality moderator refrains from asking questions mechanically, but rather engages with participants through response elicitation techniques.

Synchronous online focus group as data collection method made the most sense to me for the following reasons. My goal was to generate discourse data with affective

tonalities. Nostalgia is a social emotion and synchronous online focus group is a social event involving group interaction. Because focus groups often generate data from participants who are subjected to similar experience (studying abroad in the past in the same university), they offer a comfortable environment for collective reflection and dynamic group interaction through discourse. Gathering graduates together to reminisce would potentially trigger nostalgic feelings in them because nostalgia is often triggered in social interaction with the concerned people (Wildschut, 2006). From their current homes, the participants could respond flexibly and integrate their living environments into the reflective process because nostalgia is often triggered also in transitional life periods (Fine, G. A. 1980; Panelas, T. 1982). My aim, thus, was to create an environment where the participants were free to share their memories, experiences and stories, which would also serve as a social platform to potentially trigger the sense of nostalgia in them. This was also a way to build rapport. I wanted to establish a platform where the participants would feel nostalgic without me deliberately asking them if they felt nostalgic or not; to let the social environment shape their feelings. The participants would freely describe their perceptions of their memories: happy or sad, negative or positive, to generate discourse data with affective tonalities. After all, it is the graduates themselves who shape their own realities that make most sense to them. This initial platform would then create the springboard to further investigate the participants' revisit intention in relation to their nostalgic feelings. Moreover, just as Bennett et al. (Mittelmeier et al., 2024, 3-4) argue in their new approaches towards international student research, doing research with students instead of on them would reduce the exploitative dynamic between the students and the researcher. As a reflexive researcher, I would then aim to ''descent'' to the participants' level, and a synchronous online focus group would allow for this relaxed setting. In addition, because transnationalism is also an interdiscursive process (Park, 2017), I expect the participants to rationalize their transnational lives using language by reflecting on their past meaningful living places. An online focus group, in my case, by its nature is a transnational act, combining participants from various countries and backgrounds. Finally, the accessibility and convenience of online focus groups allowed for gathering participants across the world for a real-time collective session, which works well within the context and the available resources of this study, as the participants live in different countries.

3.3 Participant Recruitment

Sampling refers to the methods used to identify and select participants from a larger population for a study. Sampling can be categorized into non-probability sampling methods, where the researcher selects a sample based on their subjective judgement; the selection is not random (Elfil & Negida, 2017). Purposive sampling is a type of non-probability sampling, and it is often used in qualitative research. In purposive

sampling, the researcher actively selects and recruits participants with specific criteria defined by the researcher (Berndt, 2020). Because it is the researcher's responsibility to define these criteria, possible bias may occur if the criteria are too subjective or narrow.

To find participants for my online focus group study, I used purposive sampling. It is suitable when the aim is to gain in-depth understanding of a specific group. In focus group research, the participants are recruited based on their shared experience with the topic (Carey, 2016, 16-17), which in this case is studying, living and graduating in a foreign country. This in mind, I began by listing the criteria based on which I would recruit participants:

1. Having graduated from the same Finnish university
2. Being a non-Finnish national
3. Having lived in Finland for at least a year
4. Having physically left Finland after graduating
5. Currently not living in Finland

It had little significance where the participants were currently located, as long as they were not residing in Finland. Regarding the above-listed criteria number 3, I determined that having resided in Finland for around a year ensures the emotional value the participants might hold for Finland. Also, a year is the minimum time from separating them from tourists or sojourners: the United Nations Tourism defines travellers as "visitors" if staying abroad for less than a year and as "residents" if living in a country for over a year (UNWTO, 2008). As residents, then, the participants would also be differentiated from exchange students and thus, compared to them, hold stronger emotional attachment to their social groups (Cho et al., 2021) in Finland, which makes the period more meaningful to them. I did not take personal traits like gender, occupation or age into consideration because nostalgia is not limited to these characteristics: nostalgia is prevalent and experienced across all ages (Sedikides et al., 2015).

I then took advantage of my personal networks and contacted suitable participants through social media channels. I inquired their preliminary interest in participating in the study. The participants were not revealed the details of the study's core purpose but were instead given a somewhat vague description of participating in a ''group reminiscing session'' about their lives as students in Jyväskylä. This is because I avoided a detailed pre-determined topic to influence their thinking and responses: the point is to let them describe their experiences in the host country on their own terms. Eventually, five graduates confirmed their participation. The sample size was sufficient because nostalgia can arise in relatively small groups (Fairley, 2003), and, as I have argued, a maximum of eight participants is recommended in an online focus group study session.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

In preparation for ethical data collection, processing and storing, I familiarized myself with the Research Data Management guidelines on Jyväskylä University. Ethical treatment of participants must be ensured to effectively collect data. Because the study target of this thesis is people, I am processing personal data (educational backgrounds, personal opinions and stories). This requires handling the data ethically in accordance with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and Finland's national data protection law. Data minimization is part of this; I would only collect and process the personal data that is relevant to the current research. Special personal data, such as sexual orientation, political views or religion, was not collected in this study, and I would not use the real names of the research participants in the final thesis.

Prior the focus group session took place, as in guidance with Jyväskylä University, a consent form and a privacy notice explaining the research and the rights of the participants were sent to the participants by email. The participants need to be aware they participate voluntarily, what personal data is collected, how it is secured and that they are allowed to withdraw from the research at any time. The participants confirmed to the consent and privacy forms by email.

As a secure way to arrange the online focus group, I used the Zoom video chat program with my Jyväskylä university credentials. According to the Jyväskylä University data security guide, Zoom on my personal computer can be used for remote interviews, if special personal data is not being processed (University of Jyväskylä, n.d.). Also, storing data on JYU Office 365 OneDrive is permitted, if the data does not contain special personal data. I recorded the session for further analysis, and as this recording did not include sensitive personal data, I stored it on my Jyväskylä University Office 365 One Drive.

3.5 Arranging the Online Focus Group Session

The synchronous online focus group was arranged in early November 2024 on Zoom. Before I began recording the session, in accordance with the focus group and Jyväskylä University ethical research guidelines, I reminded the participants once more that the session would be recorded, where the session would be stored, for what purposes and for how long. I also ensured that they knew their research participant rights: that they were free to withdraw from the study at any point. In case they had additional questions or concerns about the study, they could contact me.

As the moderator, I had prepared a semi-structured open-ended question sheet. The first half of the questions were designed to set the ground for reminiscing and sharing stories: how often they find themselves reminiscing their lives in Jyväskylä

and how do they make sense of those memories when reflected against their current lives. The latter questions focused more on how they describe their lives in Jyväskylä to their friends and family and on their mobility plans, whether they find themselves visiting Finland or Jyväskylä in the future. The questions offered structure, yet the participants were encouraged to speak on their views and experiences freely and openly. Following the focus group guidelines, I limited the number of questions to 13 with possible additional probing questions included. However, because the session was evolving, I skipped some questions because some participants would express multiple different answers non-linearly. I tried to balance that each participant would equally share their views by engaging with them.

3.6 The Transcription Process

The one focus group session of this study took approximately one hour (57 minutes, 30 seconds) and was conducted in English. In preparation for the analysis process, I proceeded to transcribe the recorded focus group session verbatim; the transcription would serve as my *dataset*. The Microsoft Office 365 with Jyväskylä University credentials would auto-transcribe the recorded video. However, upon personally checking, the resulted auto-transcription was often choppy, with various words erroneously transcribed. To improve the accuracy of the data, I manually and holistically checked through the transcript from the beginning to the end while listening to the recording to correct any deviations between the words spoken and transcribed text. The final transcribed dataset was manually copied on a separate Word file and uploaded to the Jyväskylä University Office 365 cloud storage. In total, 7464 words were transcribed, including my questions.

One could argue the dataset to be relatively small, to which the author also agrees. Still, small samples can also offer more detailed and intimate insights into the present study subjects compared to large samples. Nostalgia is a deep subjective emotion, requiring nuanced exploration in research. Thus, while designing the study, I reckoned an intimate focus group session would lead to meaningful discussions to capture complex memories even in a relatively limited scale. While it is true that in qualitative interview studies, the number of interviews correlates with the rigor of a study (Tracy, 2010), in focus groups on the other hand, the participants may build on each other's experiences and are thus useful when investigating social phenomena. Even if the focus group session only took approximately an hour, the participants engaged actively in sharing their discourses one by one and expanded upon the experiences of other participants. There were no long silent breaks during the discussion.

As for more background details regarding the participants, all the participants were women and relatively close in age in their late 20s, which can be an advantage because similar persons usually share information with each other more openly

(Carey, 2016, 42). Personally, I knew the participants from before, and the participants knew each other as well, but to varied degrees of closeness. According to Carey, in a focus group study, the participants may know one another (Carey, 2016, 16). The participants had all completed their master level studies at Jyväskylä University (JYU) and had departed from Jyväskylä and Finland over a year ago at the time of the data collection. However, with some participants it was slightly more complicated to measure their actual departure from the university lives. While some had physically left Finland earlier, they still had not graduated and did so later by completing their studies remotely from a different country. Nevertheless, they all had lived in Finland and Jyväskylä at least for a year. For data privacy reasons, I am reluctant to share more detailed information of the participants, and I refrain from referring to them with their real names. However, the basic information and the chosen letters A, E, L, I, H that represent the participants are summarized in the below table. The letters help identify the participants' quotes presented in the Findings chapter.

TABLE 1 The Research Participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Education	Graduated and left Finland	Origin
Participant A	Female	Late 20s	Master's degree from JYU	1-2 years ago	Europe
Participant E	Female	Late 20s	Master's degree from JYU	1-2 years ago	USA
Participant L	Female	Late 20s	Master's degree from JYU	1-2 years ago	Europe
Participant I	Female	Late 20s	Master's degree from JYU	1-2 years ago	Asia
Participant H	Female	Late 20s	Master's degree from JYU	1-2 years ago	Asia

3.7 Reflexive Thematic Analysis Process

Data analysis involves systematic organization and familiarization of the collected dataset in relation to the research questions:

RQ 1: How do transnational university graduates from Jyväskylä University perceive their study-abroad experience post-emigration?

RQ 2: In what ways do they express transnational post-study abroad nostalgia towards their past Jyväskylä lives in their present lives?

RQ 3: How do their perception of the nostalgic study abroad experience and transnational ties influence their mobility aspirations?

In reflexive thematic analysis, at its core, the analysis is not a neutral activity but rather a situated and flexible one where the researcher's subjectivity functions as the primary tool: a strength. In this study, the reflexivity is especially of interest because I as a researcher may identify myself as a former transnational student and a researcher simultaneously, bringing forth possible biases (Mittelmeier et al., 2024, 17). With my researcher positions and orientations set, Braun and Clarke list the reflexive TA process roughly in six phases (2022, 35-36). However, simply mechanically following the phases does not guarantee a high-quality analysis. Analysis is dependent on the dataset, research context and researcher skill (Braun & Clarke, 2022, 11). The process is not necessarily strictly linear either. As a novice researcher, I will employ the below phases in my analysis process as a guideline while I also acknowledge the said limitations:

1. Dataset familiarization
2. Data coding
3. Theme generation
4. Theme development and review
5. Theme refining and naming
6. Writing up the final narrative

Following the above-mentioned guidelines and phases of reflexive TA, I began my data analysis process in practice. First, the objective of the dataset familiarization is to form a deep knowledge of the dataset, while also critically engaging with is solely as data. I began the data familiarization by reading through the dataset transcription while also taking overarching familiarization notes to capture my early ideas of potential meaning patterning. These activities help me gain deep familiarity with the data: to immerse. After the immersion, I began the coding phase, which is the systematic and engaged process to locate and label meaningful, research question-relevant segments and points within the entire dataset. The coding process produces codes: the building blocks, or, interesting ideas and patterns used for developing the themes later. I read through the dataset from the beginning and stopped at and tagged any potentially interesting points by highlighting them with different colours and with the comment features of Microsoft Word. I also created a Flinga mind map wall for listing and connecting the preliminary codes and ideas. The coding proved to be a rather non-linear and repetitive process: by going back and forth with the literature, research questions and the dataset, I constantly generated new, more refined codes and

abandoned the old ones while trying to remain rooted in contextualism. This was expected because the organic and flexible nature of reflexive TA makes the codes evolve during the process. Finally, to clean up the process, I made one more Word document for the dataset with the refined, final codes attached next to it.

Multiple codes construct themes that are at the heart of reflexive TA. By compiling clusters of codes, themes capture the patterning of meaning united by a shared idea. Themes are not simple topic summaries, and they are produced by the researcher, not ''identified''; they do not passively emerge from the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022, 77). The initial theme generation phase is messy and requires activity from the researcher. It is a process of making sense of the ways to cluster data. As such, I created a theme table on a separate Word file where I would list my themes with the corresponding supporting codes listed underneath each one. I focused on locating affective tones from the dataset.

Developing analytically adequate themes took many rounds: generating, developing, discarding and refining. At first, I had created five candidate themes, but I quickly realized they were simple topic summaries and offered little analytical depth. This made me redo the coding process a couple of times. To give an example, a theme I had created named ''Memory Triggers'' simply listed various triggers such as photographs or social media posts that evoked study abroad memories in the graduates, nothing more, nothing less. However, as I started thinking if these triggers have anything in common, something beyond the semantic level, I realized they must all have emotional value to the graduates, thus a new, more refined code was created titled ''Memories evoked by emotionally meaningful stimuli''.

Eventually I ended up with three themes that avoided disengaging topic listing while simultaneously encapsulated the rhetoric logos of the data narrative. Guided by Braun & Clarke, a refined theme should meet specific criteria. Can it be considered an identifiable central organizing concept, supported by enough adequate evidence, able to tell a compelling story while addressing the research questions (2022, 98-99)? The themes I generated captured the analytic narrative how the participants, through discourse, made sense of their transnational ties, mobility and feelings in relation to their study abroad period. After crafting suitable descriptive names for the themes, I created a final table for them. In the next chapter, I will present the final narrative in detail.

4 RESULTS

In this chapter, the factual account of the collected data is reported in a logical order. In general, in reflexive TA research, instead of combining them into one chapter, Braun and Clarke find writing separate Results and Discussion chapters problematic, as analytic points are often developed through engagements with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022, 132). There is a risk that the discussion chapter is written without any connection to the data analysis when the results and discussion are treated as separate entities. However, this traditional model is still possible in reflexive TA (Braun & Clarke, 2022, 133) and I choose to apply it due to my researcher inexperience: to follow a conventional study structure. In this case, Braun & Clarke advise to determine whether the data interpretation will occur in both Results and Discussion chapters, or mostly in the Discussion chapter (Braun & Clarke, 2022, 132). Acknowledging the potential traps, I choose to reserve the broad data interpretation to the Discussion chapter. This means that in this Results chapter, I will present my themes and data extracts in more descriptive and illustrative ways without much deeper level positioning to the existing literature at this stage.

The present thesis aimed to gain knowledge on transnational university graduates' perceptions of their study-abroad experiences and whether they perceive the experience as nostalgic through their discourse. Reflexive thematic analysis as my tool, I generated three final themes from the focus group dataset. By and large, the themes shed light on how transnational graduates describe and rationalize their subjective experiences and feelings related to their study abroad experiences in their post-graduate lives. They also show how these experiences tie to their present lives and, in relation to this, illuminated something about their mobility aspirations. The three themes encompass an overall story of these aspects with findings drawn from the whole dataset. The first theme, Emotional and Social Connection to the Host Country, captures the ways the graduates expressed their study abroad experience, what kind of memories they highlighted, what they missed from it and what makes them think of this experience in their current lives. The second theme, Here and There, Now and

Then: Contrasting Life Stages, expands more on their transnational ties, identities, interdiscursivity and belonging in their present lives in relation to their study abroad experience; the internal influences they absorbed from the study abroad experience. The third theme, Practical vs. Emotional Mobility Aspirations, reports the ways the absorbed influences reflect the mobility aspirations of the graduates; the more practical and external consequences. The three themes build on each other, meaning that they progress from one to the next in an interconnected way from the first theme to the third, the previous theme supporting and upholding the theme above it. In other words, the thematical logic I tried to establish is constructed as 1. a graduate might perceive their study abroad period as nostalgic, 2. therefore they have absorbed certain influences and ties from that period to their current lives, 3. which therefore influence their actions and specifically mobility aspirations. The logic is loosely based on the conceptual model presented by Cho et al., (2021) that visualizes how memorable experiences of international exchange students influence their sense of nostalgia, which in turn affects the future revisit intention. I will expand on each theme with supporting data extracts in the following chapters, to construct an analytic narrative.

TABLE 2 Final Themes

1. Emotional and Social Connection to the Host Country	**2. Here and There, Now and Then: Contrasting Life Stages**	**3. Practical vs. Emotional Mobility Aspirations**
1.1 Emotionally Charged 1.2 Memories evoked by emotionally meaningful stimuli 1.3 The memories involve shared experiences with other people 1.4 Reminiscing occurs relatively frequently 1.5 Romanticized Past	2.1 Willingly maintaining connections related to past uni life 2.2 Reflecting present self with past or future self 2.3 Imagined reality if living in Finland 2.4 Memory as a Resource for Well-Being	3.1 Study Abroad Nostalgia influencing revisit intention in country 3.2 Realistic evaluation whether to build life in Finland 3.3 Taking a Role

4.1 Emotional and Social Connection to the Host Country

This theme focuses on how the graduates express, reflect and make sense of their study abroad experience in their current lives. When asked how often they reminisce their lives and study times in Jyväskylä, in general, all the participants found themselves reminiscing it occasionally or almost daily. These memories of their lives in Jyväskylä were evoked by specific stimuli: browsing through personal photo

collections, by engaging with former study friends (''when I talk to friends that I studied with. Then we can reminisce about it together, (A)''), or by seeing social media posts or news from Finland. Observing the weather and climate phenomena in the countries they currently resided in also evoked memories from Jyväskylä in them: whether the weather was similar or completely opposite, as the below quote illuminates:

> it's like two extremes like Finland and […] It's very sunny here. [I] think about like my days in Finland when the days were a lot shorter (Participant I).

By engaging with these external or internal, physical or abstract stimuli, either actively or passively, the memories of their study abroad lives got triggered in them. These triggers were therefore emotionally charged for the participants. In addition, and more latently, the inconveniences and occasional discomfort they faced in their current day-to-day lives also made them think back on their more ''relaxed'' lives as students, as evident in the below quote.

> we had like a tradition every week that we would go and buy like some junk food and then we would do sauna and then we would, like, make food afterward. And I feel like student living is like, especially the perfect time to do this kind of a thing. It's really hard to organise something like that in a different context, I suppose. And I do, I guess, occasionally long for that because it was so easy, because it was, you know, like now in my life, I can't just casually organise something like that (Participant E)

Participants therefore expressed a longing for their past student lives, as they perceived it as a time of fewer responsibilities and greater freedom. When the graduates further described their feelings towards their study abroad period in Jyväskylä, they often conceptualized it as a positive experience associated with pleasant feelings and easygoingness. Descriptions like ''sweet'', ''good memory'', ''the good old days'' and ''beautiful time'' were expressed. Very plainly, and perhaps conveniently from my analysis perspective, some graduates also described their feelings towards the study times explicitly as ''nostalgic''. Nostalgia was, then, relatively vividly expressed in participants' recollections of their student lives. Nevertheless, despite the graduates' positive descriptions of their memories, some negativity was expressed too. When reflecting between their current and past lives as students, some graduates found themselves in a mixed emotional state:

> It's a mixed feeling. I had a really good time, but there's some… some sadness connected to not being there anymore. But on the other side, I really… I'm really glad about the time that I had there. (Participant A)

The bittersweetness that often relates to nostalgia as an emotion is highlighted in this quote. The participant coexists with a sense of loss regarding their study-abroad past. Moreover, some brought up the more negative memories too:

> …for me it was again, a big good transitional period in my life. So there's there are a lot of great memories and also a lot of like stressful ones as well (Participant E)

These underlying attitudes imply that the emotionally charged study abroad experience is not coated only in positivity. As another example, weather was often expressed as unfavourably, as the graduates recalled the host country climate:

> … It's really a unique experience that you can have in Finland. So I think about that sometimes. But yeah, also I think about how cold and dark it was. (Participant I)

These extracts imply that despite their memories being mostly positive, the graduates also remined realistic when expressing their memories (more on this in the third theme). The romanticized idea of a perfect, easygoing past student lives gets disrupted. Further, when asked how the Jyväskylä memories make the participants feel in their present lives, they expressed ''missing'' Finland and especially the friends they made there. The closeness of student friendships was frequently cited. Other common aspects they missed were the Finnish university education style, described as ''comfortable'' and ''differently structured'' by two graduates who had taken further educational courses in the European countries they currently resided in. The participants also missed the connection to nature (''connection to nature because I definitely, like, reminisce on that nostalgically as well'' (O)), outdoors and the convenience of their past lives. The convenience to them often meant the ease and accessibility of meeting up with friends and planning activities:

> I liked how relaxed I was, how close I was, how accessible it was for me to like meet up with friends or go to the nature (Participant H)

These are all things that can be considered ''healthy'' and stress-reducing. The graduates thus expressed that the social or physical aspects of their lives were richer and, in some ways, more optimal than in their current lives post-graduation, impacting their well-being and constructing a romanticized past. The contrast highlights the perception of student life as an idealized period in terms of being free from the pressures of full-time employment or adult responsibilities. The things that the graduates missed were simultaneously things they *appreciated.* In their current lives, they might lack these things, framing their present lives more stressful than their past lives. Moreover, when asked to share some memorable story from Jyväskylä, the moments and the stories often involved and were experienced with other people:

> And we biked to like other side of the lake. And then we just, yeah, biked around, like, took pictures with other friends. And yeah, that was like a very happy memory for me (Participant H)

By missing their former study friends from their times in Jyväskylä, the graduates simultaneously missed belonging to a specific community. They associated their time and happy memories from Jyväskylä with friends who shared similar circumstances with them, which implies they felt social belonging and connectedness to an imagined community, constructing a supportive and relatable space for them. This

ease of social connection was reflected with current contexts, emphasizing the special surroundings of the host country during the study-abroad period.

By highlighting the positive memories and feelings, these expressions reveal that the graduates conceptualized their lives and themselves relatively favourably in Jyväskylä. The memories and the aspects they missed seem ordinary to an outsider, not involving anything someone would necessarily describe as extreme or life changing. Yet, these ordinary activities, events and targets of missing were regularly brought up and emphasized by the graduates, as seen in the below quote:

> like I was walking everywhere […]. And I... just the other day I think, was reminiscing about like, oh, like I used to just walk everywhere and like, it was like a great, I don't know, I guess regulator for my day-to-day life… (Participant E)

Obviously, one can go for walks almost anywhere, regardless of where they reside. This emphasis on ordinary, everyday activities as something memorable constructs a romanticized image of the study abroad experience, brimmed with pleasant activities and people. Adding the closeness to the nature to the mix, the study abroad experience in Jyväskylä gets framed almost as fable-esque tale viewed through a rose-tinted lens. This constructs the study abroad experience as an impactful life event situated in specific time and space. In summary, then, while the study abroad is a nostalgic experience to the graduates, the graduates hold their own understanding of what aspects of it are nostalgic to them. Nevertheless, it is a personally impactful life event.

4.2 Here and There, Now and Then: Contrasting Life Stages

Moving forward, this theme focuses on how the graduates maintain their transnational ties to Finland, and the relevance of the impressions they absorbed from the study abroad experience in their current lives. After exploring how the graduates conceptualize their study abroad experience and whether they perceived it as nostalgic, I was interested to investigate what kind of impressions they absorbed from that period. As it is, through their emotionally meaningful memory stimuli, the graduates also expressed ways they maintain and cherish the relevance to their past study abroad lives without physically being there. Above all, the friendships they had formed in Finland carried to their current lives. Participants would often express that their enduring friendships formed during their study-abroad experiences were in key role in maintaining transnational ties. They would form friendships with both host country nationals and with nationals from their own countries of origin. The graduates would occasionally reconnect with their friends to reminisce:

> when I think about the people that I met there, who I'm still in contact with, who I still count on my… my close friends. It's… it's nice to think about like the humble beginnings, I guess, of our friendship (Participant E)

Besides friendships that extend physical boundaries, the graduates also maintained connections and relevance to their past study abroad experience in Finland by signing up for alumni studies or through their present professional lives, for example by prioritizing Finland as a viable study location:

> I work with students so whenever there is possibility or an internship in Finland etcetera or they, they, want to go for an exchange programme, I promo a lot…(Participant L)

The above quote illuminates how a positive past study abroad experience shapes the attitude towards promoting the former host country in the present life. By maintaining these ties, the graduates would simultaneously still hold relevance to their past study abroad experience in their current lives, influencing their sense of belonging. They would also inadvertently compare their current lives, circumstances and selves with their past in relation to their study abroad experience:

> you're just surrounded by... just like outdoor activities where you can just hang out with friends. And now that I'm like living in a different country, different culture. I kind of cherish that, like, memory because it's really not common everywhere else (Participant I)

They mentally connected their past, present and future selves to make sense of their narratives and personal growth or decision-making in the present. Their circumstances and contexts surrounding them would serve as their rationalization for their lifestyles. By reflecting upon their past study abroad experience, one graduate connected their present self to their past and future selves by rationalizing their choice for the place of residence:

> I also appreciate the life now that I have in more like a busier society or the work that I get to do. So even though I miss it and I would like to go back to it at some point in my life, I guess, like right now, it's not... I'm not necessarily yearning for that life experience. (Participant H)

The quote above highlights the mental bridging between the past, the present and the future selves: missing the past, more carefree self, appreciating the busier life in the present, and thus, perhaps the more productive self, and imagining a potential different future self in a different setting in Finland. Perhaps more obviously, in the below quote, another graduate expressed how their past experience affected their growth in the present, which would increase their potential and confidence in their future:

> it gives me courage and I'm proud of myself when I think about like the whole moving thing and studying and succeeding in what I did so... So the thought of like doing this again in another country, connecting with what I live then I experienced in Finland will give me courage to, OK, you've got this, like you can do it everywhere. You will adapt. (Participant L)

This extract showcases a clear continuation and growth of self throughout different life periods and consequences and highlights the transformative impact of studying abroad. The graduate perceives their past self as inexperienced, perhaps scared, in a new environment with new challenges. By overcoming and surviving the past, they then feel proud in their present, which frames their future self-perception as encouraged and competent in an imagined new space. The study abroad experience is therefore meaningful to the graduates because it influenced their values, identities and aspirations and the perceptions between past and present life stages. Moreover, certain memories gave the graduates comfort or positively influenced their values:

> And yeah, that was like a very happy memory for me. And I think that is that it really influenced me, like, my attitude in life or so even today… (Participant H)

The graduate expresses above how, through their study abroad experience in Finland, they came to appreciate nice weather more in their current daily life, giving them meaning and value. By comparing themselves and their realities spatiotemporally, the graduates also imagined their own realities if they were living in Finland, creating a mental but impactful transnational connection there:

> I have been thinking about what we discussed, how my life will be if I was still there, the struggles that I faced, why I'm not there. (Participant L)

They expressed how their lifestyle would be possibly easier in Finland, in terms of stress and convenience, in studying or raising a family for instance. However, they also often imagined they would not enjoy the weather in Finland, which would make their lives unpleasant:

> [I] miss the concept of my life and not really the actual day-to-day... like waking up it's dark, going to uni, it's dark, coming home, it's dark… (Participant A)

This reveals their underlying attitudes and images they have of Finland, which had formulated during their studies, influencing their conceptualizations if they lived there. Nevertheless, the transnational ties, thus, were both imagined or more concrete and reinforced their perceptions of and connectedness to Finland and Jyväskylä. Through their study abroad experiences, they had constructed a specific mental image of Finland and Jyväskylä. By maintaining the transnational ties, the study abroad experience remains present in the everyday lives. This is also evident in my previous theme: the study abroad times appear relatively frequently on their minds. Maintaining these transnational connections also reveals that the graduates willingly and deliberately cherish these ties. Hypothetically, they could very well cut the ties with the friends they made or delete the photo galleries of their study times they had created, perhaps as a way to move on or to separate their past lives from their current lives, but they choose not to. This also ties with the literature how students usually view their host study country positively post-emigration (Hong et al., 2020). Moreover,

Park's conceptualization of interdiscursive transnationalism is in part to explain the way the graduates rationalize their lives involving cross-border interactions, reinforcing their transnational identities. By drawing discourses from their networks of past living places, they could feel imaginatively connected to multiple geographical places, influencing their narratives and discourse. Being a nostalgic life experience, study abroad leaves graduates with impressions and sense of connection to Finland post-emigration. The interdiscursivity plays a role in how they frame their nostalgia.

4.3 Practical vs. Emotional Mobility Aspirations

In the final third theme, I was curious to find patterns of meanings how the influences the graduates absorbed from their nostalgic study abroad experience would manifest or further influence their actions, and specifically their mobility aspirations. Based on the previous themes, it was getting clearer to me that the graduates expressed their study abroad experience as nostalgic, and they kept the experience relevant in their current lives through transnational ties, imagined or more concrete. The focus would now shift from the present more to the future, although not exclusively.

Coincidentally, at the time of the data collection, two of the five graduates were not residing in the countries they were originally from. One was living in a third country for professional reasons and another one for relationship reasons. In addition, one other graduate was professionally involved with internationally mobile students. The participant A had interest in staying in Finland but had to experience social expectations and justifications in her rationalization:

> …they always ask like, oh yeah, so why… when are you going back to Finland? And then it's always hard to say because on the one hand, I would like to go back, but on the other hand, I also have a big social like system here. And there's like people that I have here and like a social surrounding that I'm connected to. So it's always hard to kind of decide, OK, why... what would be a big enough incentive for me to go back besides me wanting to be there? (Participant A)

In this position, the participant is situated in weighing the pros and cons in relocating her life to Finland under social pressure, while also valuing her study abroad experience as a valuable transformative life phase. Wanting to reside in another country implies the country holds and would offer some unique personal value that is worth obtaining or re-experiencing. When asked whether the memories the graduates had made in Jyväskylä would make them want to revisit Finland or Jyväskylä in the future, they all answered favorably. Some graduates would reason this initiative by explicitly expressing that their memories and experience were positive:

> for me, definitely like I have very good memories in Jyväskylä. So I'll go back. (Participant A)

This quote latently and explicitly demonstrates the causality of positive experience influencing the future mobility aspiration. These positive experiences often involved shared memories with others. Perhaps most evidently, reconnecting with the people associated with the study abroad experience would be expressed most undeniably by the graduates:

> I definitely have the intention to go back [for] a visit. But again, yeah, it would be connected more with seeing people that I know there versus specifically going to Jyväskylä just to go to Jyväskylä (Participant E)

This transnational social connectedness would thus be a significant motivator to revisit a location. However, despite the graduates favorably expressing their intention to revisit Finland and Jyväskylä because of their positive memories and social ties, they also simultaneously realistically evaluated if they were able to do so and when, constrained by limitations like time and money, and moreover if they would consider building their lives in Finland or in Jyväskylä in long-term:

> I think about like if I would have stayed in Finland, I would probably not have stayed in Jyväskylä as a city to like for life and work, because the city itself is not the biggest and it doesn't have like the most things to offer if you're not a student anymore (Participant A)

These realistic evaluations involved the desire to maintain close proximity to their families, pondering whether they could offer anything valuable to the Finnish job market at all or being able to tolerate the Finnish weather. Also, whether or not they would fit in as ''internationals'' was expressed:

> I still think there are a lot of challenges for international people to find jobs and to feel, I don't know, culturally, yeah, accepted. (Participant I)

The same was expressed by another graduate, perhaps in a more self-aware way:

> And I know for me it it's probably even easier because there's still a lot of issues with like internationals being accepted in Finland. And I am a very… which sounds really bad, but I'm very acceptable international because I am from Central Europe, but from other countries it's even harder to be accepted into like Finnish work life and in Finnish like society. (Participant A)

These extracts demonstrate the ability of the graduates to think and evaluate in interculturally sensitive ways. It also shows that they imagine themselves in certain way in these scenarios and thus take roles that are perhaps influenced by their past experiences in the host country. Holistically thinking, they could feel as outsiders and not necessarily able to fit in. Another graduate also took the role of an ''international'' when asked whether to recommend Jyväskylä as a living environment:

> I think Jyväskylä does have potential. Like, I think I see the, like, efforts to make the city more internationalized but then I think it would happen maybe in the next 10 years or like later. So I wouldn't necessarily stay there until then. (Participant H)

The graduates would also unconsciously take different roles when they would talk about their study abroad experience to their friends and family in their current lives. In general, they would tell more their positive experiences to their friends than negative ones:

> it was like a really good decision of my life. So I'm really glad that I did it. And I tell people about the good things. And I always tell everybody to come to Finland because it's so nice there. (Participant A)

By highlighting their positive experiences to their friends, the graduates would adopt a role of an unofficial cultural ambassador, promoting the Finnish lifestyle and culture through transnational nostalgic lens to their peers. Moreover, some imagined themselves showing around Jyväskylä to their family members, adopting a role of a tour guide:

> if I'm with someone else that hasn't been to Finland, I would love to show them like my university and go to Jyväskylä... for example. My parents like never visited me while I was there. So I was telling my mom, OK, we can go together now and I can show you my university or Helsinki and we can have a... [I] can be your tour guide (Participant L)

By adopting this role of a guide, they demonstrated how the study abroad experience continues to be a meaningful part of their transnational identities in their current lives. They would be willing to express this identity to their friends and family to make sense of their mobility trajectories and discourse. Regardless, the below quote summarizes the mobility aspirations of the graduates in relation to their study abroad experience fittingly:

> even though I miss it and I would like to go back to it at some point in my life, I guess, like right now, it's not... I'm not necessarily yearning for that life experience. (Participant H)

This extract implies that while it is relevant in current lives, the experience is clearly separated from their current mobility trajectories and contexts, but might become part of the future mobility trajectory, albeit only briefly and under certain circumstances. While people might miss their past, they prefer the past as an abstract and idealized concept, safely tucked away beyond the possibility of absolute return. The graduates deemed their student lives as separate, completed trajectories from their current lives and roles: it was good the way it was.

5 DISCUSSION

This discussion chapter is reserved for deeper interpretation of the research results. As this thesis was set to gain knowledge on transnational graduates' perceptions of their study abroad experiences and its implications to their mobility aspirations, the chapter evaluates the results and compares them to existing literature while referring to the research questions:

RQ 1: How do transnational university graduates from Jyväskylä University perceive their study-abroad experience post-emigration?

RQ 2: In what ways do they express transnational post-study abroad nostalgia in their present lives?

RQ 3: How do their perception of the nostalgic study abroad experience and transnational ties influence their mobility aspirations?

The themes generated were 1. Emotional and Social Connection to the Host Country, 2. Here and There, Now and Then: Contrasting Life Stages and 3. Practical and Emotional Mobility Aspirations. The preliminary screening of the data demonstrates that the transnational graduates who participated in the study perceive their study abroad experience as nostalgic. However, before further interpretations of nostalgia, it is important to first set the conceptual ground. Just as Becker (2018) argues, nostalgia can easily become a ''master narrative'' that is applied to any interaction with the past too hastily. The conceptualization of nostalgia should be precise, if meaningful study results are to be yielded. For a memory or an experience to be nostalgic, it needs to meet certain criteria: to involve positive emotionality, for example. Nostalgia is often evident when recalling personally meaningful momentous life events, usually shared with others, when reflecting current life to the past life (Wildschut et al., 2006). Hepper et al. definition of pancultural nostalgia (remembering past, fond and mostly happy memories, often involving personal meaning and/or

relationships with others, (Hepper et al., 2014) also serve as my comparison ground for interpreting nostalgia from the dataset.

The memories of the graduates' study lives would be triggered in them when engaging with emotionally charged stimuli. By browsing through photo collections, for example, from their study abroad time, the graduates would cherish objects of contemplation connecting them to the past (Schudson, 1983). These external nostalgia triggers are evident in nostalgia literature (Sedikides et al., 2015). Moreover, some participants explicitly perceived their study abroad experience to be a transitional life period. Transitioning between past student life to the current and perhaps less easygoing life involves emotions and nostalgia is often triggered in these transitional life periods (Fine, G. A. 1980; Panelas, T. 1982). At the end of the focus group session, when asked how they felt, some graduates had expressed feeling ''nostalgic'' caused by the group reminiscing:

> I think I'm in a nostalgic mood now. Going to look at some pictures after the call. (Participant A)

Throughout the data collection, the graduates would also insert discourses from their networks of past living places to make sense of their positionality for example by drawing comparisons between host and home country universities and lifestyles. These findings support Park's (2017) claim of transnationalism being an interdiscursive process. Moreover, perhaps the most often occurring topic in the dataset was friends. According to ISM studies, international students often form meaningful and diverse friendships during their study abroad period, and thus feel more socially connected (Hendrickson et al., 2011). This could support Cho et al., (2014) classification of as socialization that is triggered when reminiscing positive socialization experiences with one's group members.

With these comparisons with existing literature on nostalgia, I determined that the graduates did indeed perceive their study abroad experience as nostalgic. The graduates recall their study-abroad experiences positively and selectively and emphasized the meaningful and enjoyable moments. Maintaining positive attitude towards the host country after a study abroad period is discussed in earlier studies (Hong et al., 2020), and it seems to align with the present research results.

While the participants compared their current lives with their past student lives, they also constructed forms of self-continuity. This demonstrates the formation of a mental storyboard and viewing the life trajectory as a continuous journey, instigated by nostalgia (Sedikides et al., 2023). The participants would express themselves feeling more relaxed and comfortable compared to their current selves with, comparing their past selves often favourably against their current selves.

Previous studies seem to imply that transnational graduates may believe to positively contribute to the societal development of their host or home countries through the employment opportunities gained from their international education experience

(Nachatar & Jamil, 2021). This is a rather controversial topic, as national policies and governments often neglect the human side of talent mobility (Mosneaga & Winther, 2013). Perhaps this was reflected in some findings as well. Participant H expressed uncertainty whether she would be able to provide anything valuable to the Finnish labour market. As such, she inadvertently evaluated her value as a commodity (Mittelmeier et al 2024, 14). In this vein, another graduate expressed concern if she, as an ''international'', would be able to find job and be '' culturally accepted'' in Finland. While this demonstrates healthy realistic evaluation whether to build life in Finland or not, it also reveals how the graduates might perceive Finnish labour market as racist. Indeed, in Finland, the legal regime may hinder and restrain the competencies of highly educated migrants and student migrants and label them as subordinary (Ndomo, 2024). But also, by reflecting upon their roles as ''internationals'' in Finnish context, the graduates demonstrated their abilities of intercultural sensitivity, which is often a skill transnational graduates develop (Gill, 2010; Gu et al., 2010).

At the time of the data collection, graduate I was residing in a third country for working purposes. Graduate A was still traveling to Finland occasionally as she also wanted to find work there. Thus, they would demonstrate ways of weighing between the best lifestyle and career outcomes when navigating their potential mobility paths after graduating (Tharenou, 2015). As the literature also suggests, transnational graduates may prefer internationally mobile jobs in their professional lives (Findlay et al. 2012; Wiers-Jenssen, 2013). As they were navigating their mobile lives, the graduates simultaneously conceptualized their homes in various ways: whether the home was in a new third country or if it is something more abstract (Wu & Wilkes, 2017). Graduate E had moved directly to a third country after emigrating from Finland. These findings further reinforce the emergence of transnational ties of the graduates, as they derive meaning from multiple places.

When asked their eagerness to revisit Finland or Jyväskylä, the participants expressed willingness to do so because of their positive memories, which is consistent with the findings of Cho et al. (2021). Feeling nostalgic towards a place may positively influence the intention to revisit there (Chiu et al., 2023; Lu et al., 2022; Takata & Hallman, 2022). Still, while the participants express a desire to return to Finland, they frequently cite barriers such as employment challenges, family obligations, and weather as major cons. Many participants expressed how, despite their positive memories and experiences from Finland and Jyväskylä, they would not necessarily yearn to return there at their current life stages. While this is most certainly of practical reasons, such as costs, the expressions also encapsulate Velikonja's postulation of nostalgic memories well (2009): despite the past occasions holding meaning and causing yearning, these occasions are not necessarily worth going back to. In addition, the transnational ties and relationships, such as families and career of the participants pulled them to multiple geographic directions. This seems to support Geddie's emphasis (2013) how

the future mobilities of transnational graduates are shaped by their social bonds and personal relations.

As the results of this study suggest, the emotional effects and bonds formed during student mobility trajectories remain long after graduation and emigration. Sociality was the most powerful motivator and tie, connecting the graduates transnationally through time and space. The friendships they formed during their studies in the host country were preserved post-emigration, and reuniting would attract to revisit the host country. The nostalgic bond and transnational ties were not strong enough a motivation to make them consider living in the host country, but rather to visit short-term to connect with the people and friends associated with Jyväskylä, when convenient for them. What sets this thesis apart from other studies on graduates and their post-study abroad migration aspirations is its embeddedness in nostalgia.

6 CONCLUSIONS

This thesis set out to explore the ways emigrated, non-native university graduates from Finland perceive their study abroad experience and whether their post-study abroad nostalgia would influence their revisit intention to Finland or Jyväskylä. The main motivation to study these topics emerged from the macro theme of governments seeking to attract international talent, while international students are simultaneously often treated as mere commodities and free agents without mobile subjectivities. To answer to the research questions, this thesis first conceptualized nostalgia and non-native university graduates through the lens of transnationalism. It then collected data through a focus group study from transnational university graduates who had studied in Finland as full-time students but no longer resided there and analysed the data with experimental reflexive thematic analysis. Throughout the data interpretation, by reflexively positioning myself in contextualism, the goal was to hear the subjective voices and expressions of the graduates through their transnational interdiscursivity.

In conclusion, while the graduates perceived their lives and experiences from Jyväskylä positively and, generally, with nostalgic longing, and thus expressed a desire to revisit, they would revisit only to reconnect with their social peers and when it would be convenient for them. They would also not necessarily want to resettle or live their lives in Finland or Jyväskylä long-term despite their nostalgic and positive experience because, as social beings with transnational relationships, they realistically evaluated whether life in Finland would be worth pursuing. Practical obstacles such as family ties, feeling as an outsider and employment challenges often outweighed the nostalgic ties. The study life in Jyväskylä was a significant part of their overall life trajectories and transnational identities, while not necessarily a part of their mobility aspirations in their current lives, distancing themselves from their past ''student'' selves to a safe, observable distance. To use an allegory, the graduates compartmentalized the contents of their study abroad experience in a well-preserved rose-tinted box, neatly tucked away in a locked glass cabinet, making it clearly visible to them yet separated from their realities. This created a flawed ''romanticized'' past; however,

those flaws paid little significance in the big picture. The graduates would occasionally unlock the cabinet to access the box to reminisce and make sense of their current lives. They might even get inspired to revisit the origin where they collected the contents from and tell everyone how nice the contents are, even though they might seem ordinary to an outsider. However, as nice as it would be to re-experience the past, their current lives prevent them from staying in that world permanently.

6.1 Future Research Recommendations

For the future studies on nostalgia, transnational graduates and revisit intention, there are numerous possible directions. In this study, I viewed and studied my participants mostly only as emigrated graduates; I did not really take their interpersonal traits like nationality, ethnicity or sex into consideration because nostalgia is often recognized as a universal emotion. Future studies could narrow the focus further, to investigate more specifically how these traits are expressed or conceptualized and reasoned by the participants themselves and in which contexts. Would they label themselves in specific way or take special roles, for example as expats, and use this label as a rhetoric to achieve their goals, for example.

The future studies could be designed to be more longitudinal. They could investigate the temporal influence on how feelings of attachment and nostalgia for the host country change as time passes after emigration. This could be conducted, for example, by employing different stimuli in creating a nostalgic research environment. By adopting pictures or sounds would offer new angles for studying the formation of nostalgic feelings in this specific demographic. Also, adapting more country-branding literature to future studies on graduates' transnational nostalgia towards a host country would perhaps help understand how temporal distance influences country image perceptions. In general, mixed-methods approach could also be applied.

More discourse or narrative focused approaches would have likely resulted in more exciting research results. As Savin-Baden & Niekerk argue in their study on university students' learning processes (2007), narrative inquiries let the participants collaborate in the studies. This fits well with current trends on international student studies that encourage to generate more critical results by including the roles of the students and the graduates more in the research, to do research with them rather than on them. Some possible narrative methods could include psychology discourse or narrative analysis research, or a combination of them.

Also, the perception of home itself in relation to transnational graduates' nostalgia could be studied further. As some recent studies highlight, (Wu & Wilkes, 2017), international students conceptualize home in different ways, which affects their mobility plans. How would graduates conceptualize home if nostalgia shapes our meaning of home? Comparative studies that analyse the differences in lived experiences

and nostalgia between graduates who chose to stay in the host country and those who emigrated could be fruitful. To gain more rigor of this research, the themes generated from the focus group could be used for a second round of interviews to test and flesh out the themes further. They could even be developed further in a different setting. Also, theories on place attachment could be applied in similar future studies.

6.2 Limitations and Post-Reflection

As with all research, several limitations shadow this thesis. The results of this study are not suitable for generalizations how all transnational graduates might feel about their study abroad experience. The sample size and the dataset were small and served more as snapshot of the participants' lives, offering a contextualized exploration of this topic. As Bennett et al. argue (Mittelmeier et al., 2024, 16), research projects involving international students should be situated within their broader life trajectories because one project cannot fully capture the experiences and lives of the individuals. It is also worth mentioning the prevalent Covid-19 epidemic that was still impacting the everyday lives of the graduates during their studies, and thus might have directly impacted their perceptions in the data collection process.

As for the technical side of things, while the synchronous online focus group functioned as a suitable data collection method, a few times during the session the connection got slightly laggy with some participants. This could slightly harm the data collection and the legitimacy of the transcript creation. However, the lag was not very significant, and the laggy parts were acknowledged in the dataset. Also, while the interactions between the participants were relaxed, they were also less intimate than I had hoped for. The online focus group setting could have harmed the group dynamic formation and the discussion flow. Also, in an online setting, employing stimuli is somewhat limited.

One personal learning point was the time-management. According to Clarke and Braun (2022, 43), qualitative research always takes much more time than initially anticipated. This proved to be true. As a person who feels they need to holistically understand multiple sides of a given topic and its sub-topics before committing, this thesis was a lesson in having the courage to make bold and, at times, risky choices. The second personal learning point is to keep the study simple and reasonably limited. Instead of investigating all three: nostalgia, transnationalism and mobility aspirations in one study, perhaps focusing on one concept would yield more robust and concentrated research results. Due to my lack of experience as a researcher, balancing multiple (at times unfamiliar) topics simultaneously and locating their mediating roles to each other was challenging. However, because the concepts are closely related, I decided to research them all in this setting. Third, it was difficult to design and ask high-quality data collection questions. As a first-time, inexperienced focus group

moderator, at times I struggled to keep my questions concise and comprehensible to the participants. Sometimes one question would involve multiple questions. From the research participants' perspective, it is easier to receive one open-ended question at a time. However, this free, often unstructured flow of the session also allowed to venture to new areas and discover creative datapoints that I had not hypothesized beforehand, which is in nature of reflexive thematic analysis. Fourth, due to its subjectivity, coding is interpretative: different coders might make sense of the same data differently. The codes, and thus, the themes and interpretations, that I developed are only true to me, and it is my tasks as a researcher to articulate and argue them to the reader comprehensively. Therefore, the quality of the research results depends on the argumentation and reflexion skills of the researcher. A more seasoned researcher could gain more convincing results from this setting.

To conclude on a positive note, if anything, by combining nostalgia studies to transnational post-migration studies on emigrated university graduates, I have hoped to widen the door for more versatile studies and contextualized qualitative understanding of emigrated graduates and their subjective post-mobility lives, in hopes to gear towards a humane understanding and approach to their mobility aspirations. I have hoped to provide evidence of study abroad experience as a personally impactful life period often preserved by transnational ties and associated with sentimental longing, nostalgia, and therefore to contribute to international student mobility and post-migration studies. The findings contribute to the international student mobility literature by bringing the focus on the lives of emigrated graduates, who remain relatively understudied in the field. I argue that there lie implications in studying the lives and subjectivities of transnational graduates in relation to their study abroad experience after they have exited their host country. Their transnational ties continue to reinforce their connection to the host country. Thus, while many educational institutes have alumni activity, the institutes could target the end tail of the student mobility trajectories more because the study abroad experiences shape the decision making long after graduation.

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