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Beyond Tracks and Trains

The Role of Familiar Strangers in the Perception of Security at Brussels South Station

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Tracks at Brussels South Station (by author)

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This thesis is dedicated to the strangers I pass every time I am at Brussels South Station.

May you be and feel safe.

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Familiar Strangers



Exhibition sign at Bozar, Brussels (by author)

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Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of the impact of familiar strangers — people we encounter regularly, but do not interact with — on the perception of safety and feelings of security of users of Brussels South Station. Brussels South Station is a major European train station with over 350.000 weekly visitors. As typical of train stations and their surrounding area, the station district, the South Station is a stigmatised area with frequent reports of violent incidents. Applying a mix of qualitative research methods, ethnographic field research and semi-structured interviews, the results show that the concept of familiar strangers is not applicable in the case of commuters and travellers. Further, the recognised individuals by retail workers within the South Station, do not strictly fit the definition of the term. The findings of this thesis study underscore that familiar strangers occupy an ambiguous but also potent role in how individuals perceive and navigate public space.

1. Introduction

When I grew up, I took the same bus, line 106, to school every morning. Every morning at 7.15, a father and his child would get on with me and get off at the same stop, cross the same junction and then head off in a different direction. One morning, after autumn holidays, they were not at the bus stop and I was wondering what happened to them and was just happy to see them the following day. I never found out what happened, as I never actually talked to them, and soon after, I started biking to school. I know now that these were my first ever *familiar strangers*.

In an attempt to explore a new field of research, this thesis will combine the concept of *familiar strangers*, fear of crime, and feelings of security. These three concepts merge well in the context of train stations, that are often stigmatised places with high crime rates and at the same time, and they have passengers spending longer times in their vicinity than public transport hubs. For a master's thesis case study, Brussels South Station presents an interesting research ground. The station has been described in the media as a danger zone and crime hub (Chini, 2024d; The Brussels Times Newsroom, 2023), and has a passenger count of over 350.000 people weekly (Walker, 2024a).

Familiar strangers, as the name suggests, are strangers we are somewhat familiar with. In the literature they are defined as people who we observe repeatedly but do not interact with. In the context of security and safety, familiarity is a contributing factor to a heightened sense of security but strangers can contribute either a sense of unease (as a stranger in the same dark alley) or improve your feelings of security (like another person sitting at the same bus stop). A stranger can thus evoke or ease one's fear of crime. In this thesis, fear of crime is understood as the fear of an incident occurring on an individual level, which can impact a person's perception of security as well as impact their behaviour in an attempt to mitigate this fear. On a societal level this fear is scaled up in order to define and tackle potentially dangerous situations. Then, on a political level, fear of crime can be used as a tool to take on crime and danger in a society. The latter two also open up a society to the risk of instrumentalization of fear of crime, through fearmongering for example. Feelings of security are inherently linked to the concept of fear, as security only exists in contrast to insecurity, thus the absence of incidents that create feelings of insecurity or unsafety. They can be affected by external factors, such as design features and infrastructure. These three concepts are applied to the context of a train station. Train stations are dynamic places with large numbers of people passing through, which in turn increases the risk of them becoming hubs of certain petty crimes such as theft, public

nuisance, or violence. Train stations and their surrounding areas, the station district, present a geographically fixed research ground.

This thesis extends scarce research on *familiar strangers*, that mainly includes the establishment of the term in the 1970s with a replication of the original study in 2004 (Milgram & Blass, 2010; Paulos & Goodman, 2004). Both of these were qualitative studies and sparked a new wave of research of *familiar strangers* and their impact on crime in train stations since 2020 (Zahnow et al., 2021; Zahnow, 2023; Zahnow et al., 2023; M. Zhang et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2020).

The understanding of people's perception of safety is relevant societally. It contributes by identifying factors that contribute to (un)safety and developing strategies in tackling these. Furthermore, train station operators, passengers, and local governments have an interest in making train stations safer places and decreasing crime and feelings of insecurity and unsafety.

The aim of this research is to understand how users of the Brussels South Station identify and interact with *familiar strangers*, and how *familiar strangers* impact their feelings of security within the Brussels South Station and its surrounding station district. Furthermore, it addresses the general security concerns of station users and their perception of the newly opened police station in the station building. The research is carried out by applying a grounded theory approach, with an adjustable iterative process of qualitative research methods in the form of field ethnography and semi-structured interviews.

This thesis starts with a deep-dive into the existing literature, explaining the main concepts of this thesis, and leading into the theoretical framework. The following section on the research design is comprised of the problem statement, the process, and the methodology. The results are presented in a critical reflection, with an overview and a section for each of the three research phases. The results were then linked to the literature in more detail in the discussion, which also contains limitations and positionality. Lastly, the research questions are answered in the conclusion, and a few suggestions on potential future research are made.

2. Literature

In this section, I explore different topics concerning the broad topic of “feelings of security in train stations” within the scientific literature. First, I will delve into the ‘train station’ and its definition, then I will contextualise crime, fear, and feelings of security within the train station, and lastly, I will conceptualise the key term of this thesis, familiar strangers, and how this term fits into the context of the train station.

2.1 Defining the station

Stations as dynamic locations are often perceived as dangerous locations; public announcements warn passengers in many major train stations across Europe to not leave bags unattended and to look out for pickpockets. When one looks up the term ‘train station’ on the internet, news articles on disasters, bomb threats, crowd crushes and crime statistics pop up. A google search on the 7th of August 2025 showed headlines such as “Engineer warns of potential collapse of the Prokop train station”, “Ukrainian drone attack sparks fire at railway station in Volgograd region, Russia says”, and “Ukrainian drones strike train station in Russia's Volgograd Oblast, governor reports” (Basmat, 2025; Kelly, 2025; Rakic, 2025).

In recent years train stations have additionally been studied in the context of their surrounding area. The relevance of station districts is described by Üblacker and Lukas (2019), who research social inequality, gentrification, and criminal activity in the station district of Düsseldorf. The authors find that there is a typical social stigma attributed both by residents within the station district as well as from beyond the neighbourhood in other areas of the city. Residents of the neighbourhood have anxieties concerning the topics of economic and material stability, crime rates, and displacement. Some of this stigma also acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy as people’s perception and thus selective observation reinforces pre-existing stereotypes. An example mentioned by Üblacker and Lukas (2019) is the feeling of unsafety keeping certain demographics from moving into the neighbourhood, which in turn means there is a lower social mix and a higher chance of altercations, which then reinforces the feelings of unsafety. However, the process of gentrification as a countering force is explained by the authors. They say that the perception of the station district as a problematic neighbourhood has led the local government to push for higher police intervention in recent years.

This leads to increased feelings of safety and attracts more people, which drives the rents up and ultimately leads to the displacement and peripheralization of the current residents.

Another relevant phenomenon, the displacement of disorder, has been described by Lukas and Coomann (2021). The authors explain that many local authorities use interventions in the form of urban design or the presence of law enforcement to lower disorderly or criminal activity, especially in public spaces such as town squares in and around train stations. They further find that these interventions rather lead to the displacement of disorder, such as in homeless people or drug users, to other places where they in turn increase criminal activity.

On a more quantitative note, Zahnow (2023) studied the criminogenic effects of train stations, meaning that physical and social features of train stations attract opportunities for crime. In the 2023 study, Zahnow found that train stations as dynamic places with a regular flow of people allow for certain petty crimes, such as theft, to occur more easily, as perpetrators are presented with many potential victims and the disguise of a moving crowd. Other crimes, of a more violent nature, are however less frequent with many potential witnesses around.

On a different note, Lutz et al. (2024) bring up that many station districts are subject to transit-oriented development (TOD), which leads to densification of housing in areas in close proximity to transport hubs such as metro stops or train stations. The newly built residential units in their case study area of Zurich were mainly to the benefit of mid- to high-level income earners and led to an overall gentrification of the area. This type of neighbourhood development can also lead to the displacement of specific demographics of the local population, while not helping prevent the petty crimes described by Zahnow (2023).

This view of station districts as ‘problem areas’ in cities is partially amplified by repeated media reports which lead to “territorial stigmatisation” (Schwarze, 2022). It is a discursive practice in journalism that, on the one hand, produces the actual text and the message readers take away from it, but also helps in establishing a wider context in which any future report will be understood (Richardson, 2007). Schwarze (2022) describes the process of territorial stigmatisation for the area of Chicago South Side which has suffered from decades of racist segregation as well as marginalising and discriminatory urban planning practices. There are ongoing media reports on the area that claim gangs as the source of urban violence and insecurity without taking these historic practices into account. To an uninformed reader, the media reports inform and reinforce their image of the area,

which in turn affects the behaviour of people frequenting, moving to, or investing in the area. Similar findings have been reported by Esberg and Mummolo (2018), who studied the misperceptions of crimes in the United States. Despite the crime rates rapidly declining in the United States, most Americans believe that crimes are rising. In their large-scale survey contextualised by a decade's worth of crime statistics, the authors find this misperception to be a byproduct of Americans' lacking exposure to factual information about crime, meaning the news coverage has a major impact on crime perception. One can refer to the findings of Hipp (2013), that state that violent crime in particular is a predictor for negative perception of crime, meaning that reports on violent incidents lead to a more negative crime perception than e.g. property crimes. Hence, non-factual or one-sided media coverage leads to territorial stigmatisation and creates an environment where disadvantaged people might turn to criminal or disordered activity to survive. In that sense stigmatised urban areas such as station districts can be caught in a cycle as described by Üblacker and Lukas (2019) and Lukas and Coomann (2021) which could then negatively influence the feelings of security within these public places.

Territorial stigmatisation goes hand in hand with the phenomenon “perception bias” as described by F. Zhang et al. (2021). The authors study the link of “perception bias” to three urban features, namely socioeconomic features, urban livelihood and urban diversity in the city of Houston. They find that in certain cases, a mismatch of crime and perception of safety exists which they divide in the categories “more dangerous than it looks” and “safer than it looks” (ibid, p.11). They found one case in which, a dense mix-use area can seem, while in reality non-violent crime rates are on the rise – the indicators urban livelihood and urban diversity are misleading. This is especially the case for people that do not know an area well, which is the case for many station users who do live in other areas of the city.

2.2 Contextualising the station - crime, fear, security

The perceived danger and the fear evoked within train stations stem from more basic concepts such as feelings of safety. In his discussion on safety as a scientifically studied concept, Hollnagel (2014) reiterates different definitions of safety. He mainly focuses on safety sciences as they examine places of work and accidents. However, the thought of safety as a ‘non-event’ still works in the case of individual safety. This means when everything happens as intended: a person might feel safe in

the absence of incidents or accidents. Hollnagel's (2014) discussion informs my research in the sense that safety can only be studied in comparison to unsafety.

Going further into the concept of safety within the social sciences, feelings of safety are closely related to the fear of crimes — the fear of an incident happening, as explained by Hollnagel (2014)— and informs people's perception of which places, practices and people they consider safe (Fanghanel, 2015). Fanghanel (2015) describes that the construction of self in relation to others is at the basis of the production and deployment of safety and fear of crime for the individual. Furthermore, she highlights the relationship with individuals' race, gender, and class and how they impact a person's feelings of safety. While Lapham et al. (2016) found similar factors in their study about the feelings of safety of park users, the main takeaway was that an increase in facilities and active people positively impacted self-reported perception of safety in a park. The influence the presence of people has in the context of the usage of a public park might also translate into the research of how it impacts the feelings of safety in other places such as train stations. Safety as a concept is interlinked with the incident — in this context the incident of a crime and the fear of it happening.

Enhus (2023) describes different levels of fear of crime. Fear of crime can affect a person on either an individual, societal, or political level and each of these levels cause different reactions. According to Enhus (2023), the typical response on the individual level is protection and avoidance. Vanderveen (2006) describes how fear is a psychological construct especially on the individual level. According to Enhus (2023), on the societal level, fear of crime leads to establishing precautions, encouraging the flight from deprived areas, and lastly damages to social trust, intergroup relations and the ability of communities to exercise social control. On the political level, the typical response might include surveys on feelings of insecurity to propose punitive measures and simple solutions such as surveillance and securitization measures to 'keep out danger'. This is often related to fear-mongering of particular groups.

The article by Enhus (2023) expands further on this, explaining that expressed fear evokes anxiety and leads to the connotation of signals to crime and events such as groups of young people gathering, particularly men, people spraying graffiti, and signs of vandalism, such as broken windows. The latter relates to a popular idea that poorly maintained or vandalised areas are more prone to be the location of crime, called the "broken windows theory" (O'Brien et al., 2019; Wilson and Kelling, 1982). In contrast, well-maintained facades and pruned trees are interpreted as a sign

of safety, resulting in a higher perception of safety F. Zhang et al. (2021). Enhus (2023) explains that these fearful reactions to perceived signs of unsafety are a learned behaviour in our society, especially the fear of strangers which is learned at a young age, and then further enforced by media reports. According to the author, this means that discourses of fear can be interpreted as an instrument of social control. Vanderveen (2006) has a similar view on the instrumental use of fear, such as surveys providing the basis for increasing a fear of crime in broader society. According to Vanderveen, the growing fear within wider society in combination with the prevention of vigilantism can be used to argue against ignoring the public's opinion. There is a risk of governments misconstruing public opinions as justification for their interventions — public opinion is used within a political framework and typified as 'law and order' or 'zero tolerance'. Vanderveen delves into the argument of needing to take the public's opinion, the carefully curated fear of crime, into account in a democracy but later in her text disputes the 'democracy-at-work thesis'. This notion of fear of crime as a political symbol and instrument relates back to territorial stigmatisation mentioned in the discussion on station districts (see Schwarze, 2022).

In agreement with the findings of Fanghanel (2015) and Lapham et al. (2016), Enhus (2023) discusses that patterns of fear of crimes often occur along the lines of gender. A study conducted by Johansson and Haandrikman (2023) showed that women in Eindhoven, in line with similar previous works, tend to be more fearful than men. The authors explain that a woman's fear in public space is complex and informed by various factors, such as the neighbourhood they are in and its layout, the building functions, and the use of space by other people. Gilow (2016) explains that incidents in public happen to men and women expressing their identity in a way that is "deeply rooted in a society structured by the male/female dichotomy, with restrictive consequences for women" (Gilow, 2016, p.2). She also explains that feelings of unsafety do not stem from security problems in need of security intervention but rather from a societal shift.

Fear of crime and feelings of security in public space can be further put into context of the train station and the station district. There is a vast body of scientific literature covering crime and safety of passengers on local and national transport, as well as in train stations and public transport stops. Xu et al. (2019) conducted large-scale risk assessment within station buildings. The perceived risks in this study cover so-called "risk interaction chains" that, based on a single risk event, calculate and simulate possible interaction and reaction scenarios. The authors propose that their findings, in considering the possible outcomes such as the logical steps in chain 60 "Power supply

failure→Panic→Congestion→Stampede”, meaning a power supply failure could lead to a panic with people leaving the area, congesting the exits, and increasing risks of fatal stampedes (Xu et al., 2019, Table 3, p.6). These logical chains allow for an improved risk management in station operation. Other research on the operational side covers the themes of boarding controls to counter potential terrorist attacks (Baron and Le Bot, 2020), the use of artificial intelligence in detecting anomalies in crowd dynamics (Vayadande et al., 2024), and the usage of danger zones for crowd control (Thureau et al., 2019).

Studies also address the individual passenger in the context of station danger and safety research. For example, Larue et al. (2021) explored the environmental and structural characteristics of the design of rail terminals which could help in preventing slip, trip, and fall incidents from passengers. They attempted to consider risky behaviour but could not make definitive conclusions on the effects of behaviours such as using one's phone while boarding a train.

Sundling and Ceccato (2022) found another aspect of behaviour at the individual passenger level. In their systematic review of over 50 publications, they explored which characteristics impact safety perceptions in what they call rail-bound environments and what reactions in behaviour these perceptions of unsafety cause. They conclude that the most critical characteristics in the environment were lighting, surveillance, other people's behaviour, and the time of day, but the perception of unsafety was also heavily influenced by people's gender. Moreover, they found that different types of avoidance and protective behaviours, for example avoiding travel at certain times of the day or by certain modes as well as bringing protective items, were among the reactions in consequence of perceived unsafety. These avoidant behaviours can be linked to the idea of situational crime prevention, that focuses on the symptoms rather than the root causes of crime and is displayed in individual choices and behaviour (Wortley, 2010).

Other people's behaviour is a central focus in a publication by M. Zhang et al. (2022). The authors examined crime in and around stations in Brisbane, Australia, and the impact that passenger presence had on three different types of typical crimes occurring in stations, namely public nuisance, drug offences, and theft. They found that passenger presence affected these three kinds of crimes differently. While public nuisance decreased with higher passenger presence on weekdays, it increased on weekends and public holidays. It seems that an extra increase of people who diverge from their daily commute and travels has a higher chance of resulting in nuisance. The authors explain that other factors, such as events and demographics also play a role in this. On the

other hand, drug offenses are similarly affected on weekdays, but no further significant relationship was detected for it, nor for theft on weekends and public holidays. However, theft was positively associated with passenger presence on weekdays, which they plausibly linked to a higher number of people on platforms and in trains posing greater opportunities for theft. M. Zhang et al. (2022) attribute this to passengers in daily life functioning as a sort of informal guardian when it comes to drug offences and public nuisance - similar to Jane Jacobs' notion of "eyes on the street" (Jacobs, 1962). In a study, F. Zhang et al. (2021) discussed that the presence of people might cause a perception bias, meaning that a crowded station at day-time is perceived as safer than it actually is. Passengers interpret other travellers as "eye on the street", while pickpockets actually have more cover for their activity.

In extension of Jacobs' idea of daily surveillance, Cohen and Felson (1979) introduced the idea of the routine activity approach. They argued that with rising changes post-World War II, such as women leaving the house to participate in the labour market and the rise of longer vacations, perpetrators gained more opportunities to commit crimes. This is applicable both to crimes such as the burglary of homes, when residents are leaving for extended periods of time, as well as crimes to an individual increasing the risk of falling victim with each new person they encounter. In his review of routine activity theory, (Miró, 2014) explains the probability of being targeted for a crime depends on four attributes as established by Cohen and Felson and later on developed by Felson and Clarke. The offender decides on their target by value, inertia, visibility, and access (VIVA).

In light of the two main different types of unsafety (accident versus incident) outlined above, it is noteworthy to highlight the findings of Coppola and Silvestri (2020). They showed that passengers are usually less worried about accidents than they are about violence or strangers. Furthermore, they found that by participating in their study, many people questioned the themes of security and safety in the station for the first time, "suggesting the existence of conscious and latent perception, and confirming that the interview itself represents an experiential learning exercise that can modify the knowledge and, thus, the perception of factors previously unknown or poorly evaluated a-priori." (Coppola and Silvestri, 2020, p.1135). This is an important aspect in researching the perception of safety.

The immediate solution to crime often proposed is the police. The tool of policing is however more complex. In 1974, Kelling et al. studied police patrolling in Kansas City and found it to be ineffective in preventing crime in Kansas City's hotspots. Based on this original work, more recent studies have

focused on the impact of police patrolling on different scales and different types of crime. Foot patrols in small-scale hotspots have been found to lead to significant reduction in violent crimes but did not have a long-lasting impact (Novak et al., 2016). On a larger geographic scale, patrolling displayed small crime prevention benefits, with a significant reduction of property and violent crime, insignificant increase of drug use and disorder (Weisburd et al., 2024). In neither of these cases could evidence be found for the displacement of these criminal activities. While Lukas and Coomann (2021) argued in favour of displacement of disorder, there is an argument to be made for the actual prevention of crime without displacing it by reducing opportunities and VIVA.

In addition to the effect of policing on crime rates, one can look at the perception of police and policing. Small-scale police patrolling and interaction with the local community, also community policing, follows the idea that increasing police presence will help in increasing positive perception and legitimacy of the police (Hawdon et al., 2003). Hawdon et al. found that this idea is accurate to a certain degree, as community policing creates an image of initiative against crime or active intervention to the local population, and that perceived decrease in police activity can lead to frustration among the population. While Hawdon et al. (2003) focus on the visibility of the police increasing trust, Schafer et al. (2003) studied the interaction of the police with residents. In their article, the authors state that participants who had positive interactions with the police and displayed a positive view on their community culture and neighbourhood, were more likely to have a positive view on community police services, even in case they lived in an area with higher crime rates in their city. In contrast, those participants dissatisfied with their police encounters were more likely to have a negative view on the police. Due to constraints in establishing a temporal order, it is however unclear, if the negative view on the police might yield in higher dissatisfaction rate with police encounters (Schafer et al., 2003). This idea of a negativity bias is further discussed by Skogan (2006). Skogan studied the asymmetry in the impact of police encounters and found that the negative experiences with the police outweigh the positive experiences regardless of who initiated the first contact. He argues that the negativity bias, that leads people with prior negative views on the police to interpret their encounters and experiences with the police negatively, is stronger than an experience impacting peoples' general view on the police.

Lastly, the impacts of policing must be understood in the context of its negative consequences. Police presence and policing is often associated with bias and prejudice towards minorities. Schafer et al. (2003) found that white women are the demographic group most likely to have a positive view

on the police, while people of colour were much less likely to share that view. Gender and racial profiling targeting minorities are among the most often critiqued policing strategies (Newburn and Reiner, 2007; Warren and Tomaskovic-Devey, 2009). Nadal and Davidoff (2015) found that ethnic minorities as well as queer minorities tend to have a more negative view on the police than the general population. They further discovered that prior experiences determine a person's perception of interactions with the police. According to their findings, one's attitude towards police influences one's willingness to cooperate or initiate contact with the police. This corroborates prior findings on the negativity bias (Skogan, 2006). Considering the minority of homeless people, studies show that homeless people often feel targeted and harassed by the police for their mere existence (Hartmann McNamara et al., 2013). Hartmann McNamara et al. take the view that the problem lies within the training of the police, with police officers often thinking of "their role in relation to the homeless only in terms of law violations – officers will take action in the form of arrests, citations, or some other means of formal social control if a homeless person commits a crime or if they create a crime-producing atmosphere." (Hartmann McNamara et al., 2013, p.369).

2.3 Conceptualising the station - Strangers in the station

As many passengers' biggest source of fear is the stranger, it will be interesting to bridge the gap between the stranger and the familiar. *Familiar strangers* differ from the mere stranger, who might be a witness to what is happening in a place, as M. Zhang et al. (2022) suggested with their findings on passengers acting as informal guardians in public spaces. The term *familiar stranger* was introduced by Milgram in 1972, in a paper opening with: "Nothing is more characteristic of urban life than the fact that we often gain extreme familiarity with the faces of a number of persons, yet never interact with them." (Milgram & Blass, 2010, p.60).

Milgram further explains his own experience of encountering these *familiar strangers* on his commute, who have over the years become part of the environment at the station for him. Like much of his work, he discussed and explored the *familiar stranger* concept with his students, one in particular being Harry From, who established the idea of the *familiar stranger* relationship, like any other relationship, being the product of time. This led Milgram to the notion of the 'frozen relationship', as "The *familiar stranger* status is not the absence of a relationship, but a special form of relationship, that has properties and consequences of its own." and later described in a 1974

interview: “The familiar-stranger phenomenon is not the absence of a relationship but a special kind of frozen relationship.” (Milgram and Blass, 2010, p.xx). He defines this relationship by establishing three conditions: “To become a *familiar stranger* a person (1) has to be observed, (2) repeatedly for a certain time period, and (3) without any interaction.” (Milgram & Blass, 2010, p.60).

In the remainder of his 1972 essay, Milgram describes a small-scale study on people recognizing strangers in a familiar setting in New York that he conducted with his students. For this study, he had a group of students from The City University of New York take pictures of groups of waiting passengers at a commuter station for trains into New York City early in the morning. In the next step, they numbered the people on the photographs, created a cover letter and survey and distributed them at the same station the following week to ask the commuters to fill out the survey in their waiting time. They found that approximately 90% of the respondents recognised at least one person, with the mean number of *familiar strangers* recognised being 4 and the number of acquaintances - people they rarely spoke or interacted with - being 1.5 people. Additionally, they found that certain people depicted in the photograph got recognised more often than others, and called them “socio-metric stars”. It is of interest to note that in addition to recognising fellow commuters, the survey respondents described that they imagined the life of these *familiar strangers*, which the researchers coined a “fantasy relationship to *familiar strangers*” that the respondents never explored any further. They describe the relationship of a person with a *familiar stranger* as one where “both parties have agreed to mutually ignore each other, without any implication of hostility.” (Milgram and Blass, 2010, p.62).

In his subsequent work, Milgram explored these behaviours and attitudes towards strangers in the urban context. The introduction of his book, used for this thesis, opens with the following sentence: “The argument for studying the effect of the city on the individual seems self-evident: it is the fate of many of us to live in cities, and we ought to understand how this social fact shapes feeling, action, and thought.” (Milgram and Blass, 2010, p.3). He also contrasts the behaviour of urban and rural dwellers, such as “If you live on a country road you can say hello to each of the occasional person who passes by; but obviously you can’t do this on Fifth Avenue.” (ibid, p.xxiii). In his work on the urban bystander effect he reflects on the effects of social distance when it comes to helping a person in need “There are, of course, practical limitations to the Samaritan impulse in a major city. If a citizen attended to every needy person, if he were sensitive to and acted on every altruistic impulse that was evoked in the city, he could scarcely keep his own affairs in order.” (ibid, p.33).

Milgram's study and the concept of *familiar strangers* had been ignored in geographical research for decades until Paulos and Goodman replicated it in Berkeley, California in 2004. They describe the impact of *familiar strangers* as such: "the individuals who affect us are ones that we repeatedly observe and yet do not directly interact with" (Paulos and Goodman, 2004, p.1). They go on to replicate Milgram's definition of the term of a *familiar stranger* as a person that "(1) must be observed, (2) repeatedly, and (3) without any interaction" (ibid) and continue to give the example of a fellow commuter on the subway whose absence one might notice. They explain that *familiar strangers* fill the gap between the people we know and complete strangers, by establishing our connection to places where we encounter them regularly, in familiar settings.

In their replication of Milgram's study, they note the particularly notable kind of *familiar stranger*, the "socio-metric stars" who stand out from the crowd and are readily recognized by a higher number of people. This often goes hand in hand with the personalisation of one's *familiar strangers* "by giving them names and/or concocting fictitious stories and backgrounds of their personal lives." (Paulos and Goodman, 2004, p.1).

They draw from other researchers such as Goffman (1966) when interpreting the role of the *familiar stranger* in an urban setting. Goffman explains that in smaller communities, people are expected to greet each other upon meeting - he draws the "nod line" at 150 people - while urbanites maintain "civil inattention" in sudden small settings like a train platform. Paulos and Goodman interpret the *familiar stranger* as being tied to daily urban life in contrast to Goffman's explanation of rural life. In a second part of their study, Paulos and Goodman explored the idea of the "Jabberwocky", a device to detect *familiar strangers* and places based on the amount of people, how familiar the wearer of the device is with them, and if they share other familiar places or people. Since the publication of the article, technical advancements, especially in the field of smart devices, have been made, which render this section of their paper obsolete.

In addition to the early qualitative exploration of *familiar strangers*, sometimes also called *regular riders* (see Zahnow, 2023) in quantitative research, there has been an increased interest in the topic, particularly in light of the availability of large-scale travel data from smart card public transport systems. There are several studies combining this travel data with crime records in order to explore the effects of *familiar strangers* on criminal behaviour.

These studies often still employ similar definitions of the concept as the qualitative studies outlined above. Liang et al. (2016) define *familiar strangers* as “two persons who have repeatedly encountered but might never have been acquainted with each other” (Liang et al., 2016, p.1). Zahnow (2023) describes *familiar strangers* within the realm of public transport as strangers that one observes on a regular basis in the same spaces such as at a train or bus station at the same time every day or week. Zahnow further studied the effect of people at train stations and how they facilitate the criminogenic effects of train stations meaning that the physical and social features of train stations attract opportunities for crime. More precisely, the author researched *familiar strangers* as (perceived potential of) crime is a major factor in social interactions. She outlines the criminogenic effects of train stations as risky facilities and defines a research gap in connection with the concept of *familiar strangers*. The study analyses three data sources on public transport data (of smartcards), crime data, and census data. The author hypothesises that the crime risk in train stations is lower when the potential for encountering *familiar strangers* is higher. The results are ambiguous in a sense that they do not prove the hypothesis per se. However, if considering the neighbourhood composition, one can expect lower crime rates at stations in homogenic areas where one could encounter a *familiar stranger*. This is attributed to the community aspect of homogeneous neighbourhoods which causes people to defend the people they perceive to be of their community.

In another study conducted by Zahnow with fellow researchers, the authors further explain that regularity influences place awareness, as well as public familiarity and perceived anonymity (Zahnow et al., 2023). Their results showed that the presence of what they call regular passengers decreases both the risks of theft and property damage. They bring up two potential explanations by hypothesising that a person attending an area more regularly might have a higher guardianship or that a potential offender feeling like part of a temporary community might be less likely to act out against it. Furthermore, they highlight that the overall number of criminal offences is also influenced by the use of the land surrounding a train station. All crimes recorded in the study were more likely to happen in a commercial area, rather than a residential one. They link this notion back to Jacobs's (1962) idea of ‘eyes on the street’ and propose that mixed-use areas with a high number of regular passengers (which could be perceived as potential *familiar strangers*) might have an optimal balance of observation and guardianship at all times of the day.

Zahnow further collaborated on a publication that uses a slightly different definition of the *familiar stranger*, than the one above. M. Zhang et al. (2022) characterise them as people you encounter

several times within a timeframe in the same space, as quantified by two smart card users having a minimum of two encounters over an outlined period, in their study for 9 days, which encompassed two weekends and the weekdays in between. Their aim stands in contrast to the other quantitative studies as it is a mere exploration of *familiar strangers* on the Brisbane transit system. They found that there were general patterns of *familiar strangers*, they followed comparable daily cycles and peaked around typical commuting and school start and end times and plummeted during evenings and on the weekend. Moreover, the highest concentration of *familiar stranger* encounters can be found at places that have, in general, a high in- and outflux of people, such as the business district of Brisbane. Lastly, they found lower *familiar stranger* encounters than researchers in similar studies found in Beijing and attributed this to the differences in population density and public transport use (Zhou et al., 2020). They also conclude that based on these inconsistencies the comparison with other studies is not feasible. M. Zhang et al. (2022) also dedicate part of their discussions to highlighting the limitations their method has. Whether two card users, who in theory encounter each other over the stretch of their respective trips, are somewhat familiar to one another cannot be empirically proven. Furthermore, there is the possibility that people who simply know each other, such as friends, family members, or colleagues are travelling together and should not be counted in these types of studies. Zhang et al. take this into account and try to circumvent this by using techniques such as the creation of hotspots, but the validity of an entirely quantitative method to study *familiar strangers* needs to be examined.

2.4 Theoretical framework

In this literature review it becomes clear that the concepts of fear of crime, feelings of safety, and train stations are connected. With rising fear of crime, an individual's feelings of security decrease. Train stations as dynamic places, exhibiting criminogenic effects, often evoke fear of crime or conflict. Based on the existing body of literature, I have created the following model to visualise the research scope of this thesis. As shown in Figure 1 below, feelings of safety, informed by media reports, security measures and routine or familiarity are heavily impacted by (a) the absence of crime and (b) the presence of strangers, particularly those that are part of stigmatised groups. In turn, both crime and strangers relate to train stations or station districts as they are locations with criminogenic effects, and places to encounter large numbers of strangers. Train stations themselves are thus often

discussed as places where users feel unsafe. From this interplay arose the idea of *familiar strangers* in the station area.

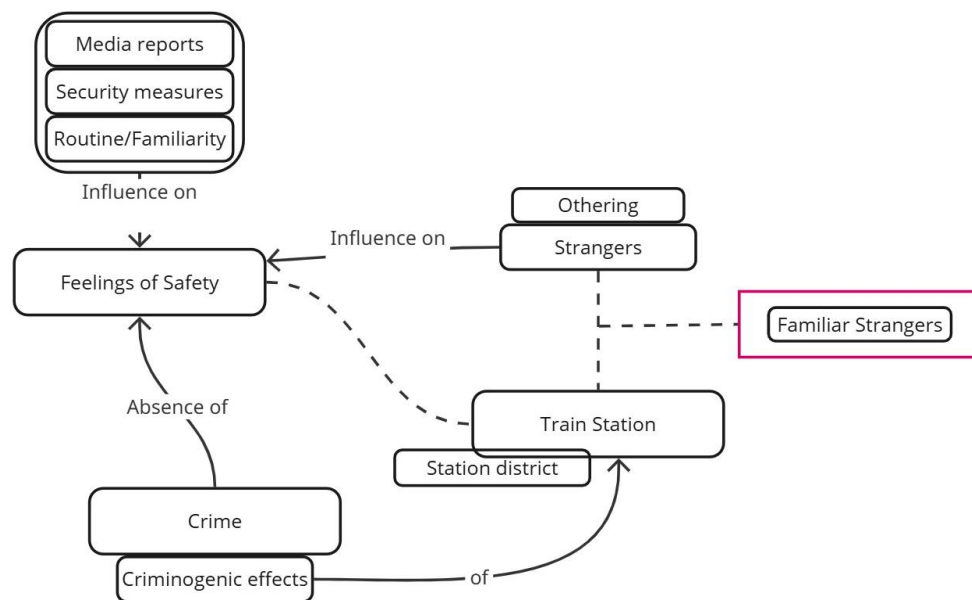


Figure 1 Conceptual model (created by author)

In this thesis I will use the concept of *familiar strangers* as a link between all three of these concepts. A rising number of strangers can on the one hand increase the fear of crime but also create a heightened sense of security, especially if they contribute to the familiarity of a situation. Train stations pose the opportunity for many encounters, sometimes repeated for those who frequent the station on a regular basis, and have been the place of research on familiar strangers in the past.

From this interplay of the main concepts, I have created the theoretical framework that will serve as a lens to understand the dynamics in the case study, displayed in Figure 2.

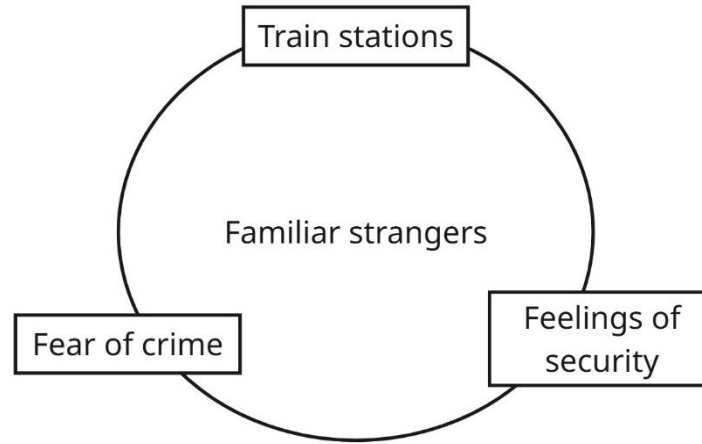


Figure 2 *Theoretical framework (created by author)*

3. Research Design

3.1 Case Study

The main reason for a singular case study relates to time and resource constraints. Moreover, case studies are useful in developing a more structured understanding of new topics and providing an in-depth analysis and are thus especially suited for exploratory research (Rowley, 2002). This initial case study allows the generation of qualitative data that contributes to the building of theory on familiar strangers and feelings of security in train stations.

The choice of case study is owed to several factors, including location of research institute, time constraints, and applicability. Brussels is a diverse European capital city with three major train stations: the North Station, the Central Station, and the South Station. The North Station was ruled out due to intensive prior research done by the supervising professor (Steenhout, 2009). Between the Central Station and the South Station, the South Station is the one infamously known for violent incidents and raising security concerns (Chini, 2024a; The Brussels Times Newsroom, 2024d, 2024e; The Brussels Times with Belga, 2024c, 2024d).

3.1.1 Brussels South Station and its surroundings

Brussels South Station is located south-west to the centre of Brussels, in the south-west of the municipality of Sint-Gilles/Sint-Gillis, bordering the municipalities of Anderlecht and Forest/Vorst (see Figure 3). Its precise location means the overall station district falls under the jurisdiction of three different municipalities. While the municipality of Sint-Gilles/Sint-Gillis is responsible for the building itself, the overall development of the surrounding areas needs to be executed in cooperation with the municipalities of Anderlecht and Forest/Vorst.

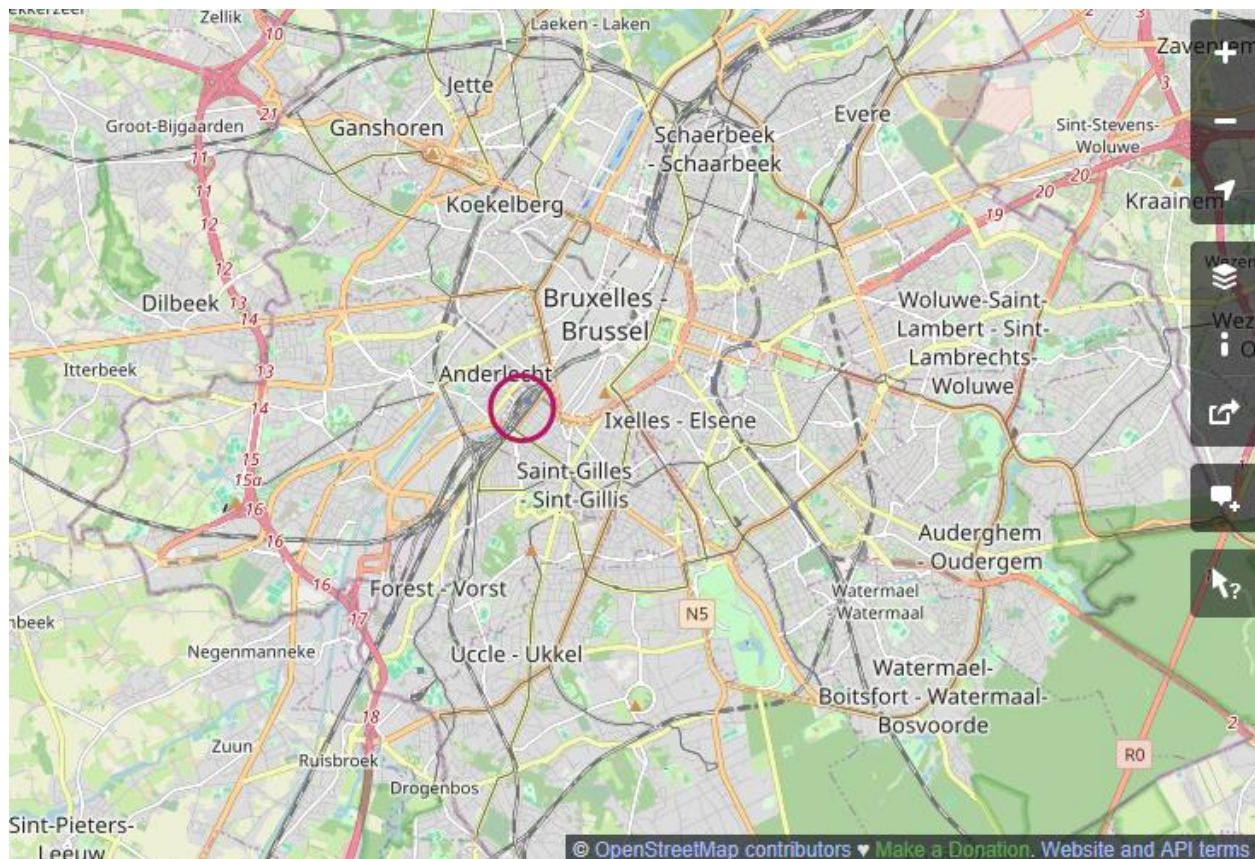


Figure 3 Location of Brussels South Station (OpenStreetMap, 2025, adapted by author)

In the context of security, Brussels has seven police zones that comprise several of the 19 municipalities each. Brussels South Station is located in the police zone ‘Midi’ which includes the three municipalities St-Gilles/Sint-Gillis, Anderlecht, and Forest/Vorst (BXL Open Data, 2024a, 2024b). The police zone Midi has one central precinct (Fr: commissariat central) in each of the three

municipalities, as well as six additional precincts dispersed throughout the zone, four of which are in Anderlecht and one in each of St-Gilles/Sint-Gillis and Forest/Vorst (Police Locale Midi, 2025).

The Brussels Institute for Statistics and Analysis (BISA) (in French/Dutch: Institut Bruxellois de Statistique et d'Analyse/ Brussels Instituut voor Statistiek en Analyse) operated by perspective.brussels gives insights into the demographics of the South Station district. To gain an idea of the station district, the building, and its surrounding areas, the numbers of the surrounding administrative districts *Cureghem Vétérinaire*, *Cureghem Bara*, *Annessens*, *Stalingrad*, *Marolles*, *Porte de Hal*, *Bosnie*, and *Bas Forest* (names in French) are used as an indication for the station district, as it is partially located in or bordering each of these areas. For each parameter the most recent data available by the Brussels institute for statistics and analysis was used, ranging from 2021 to 2024 (brussels instituut voor statistiek en analyse, 2025; institut bruxellois de statistique et d'analyse, 2025).

On the maps below, one can see that the South Station district is one of the more populated areas of Brussels, with a population younger than the average as of 2024 (see Figure 4).

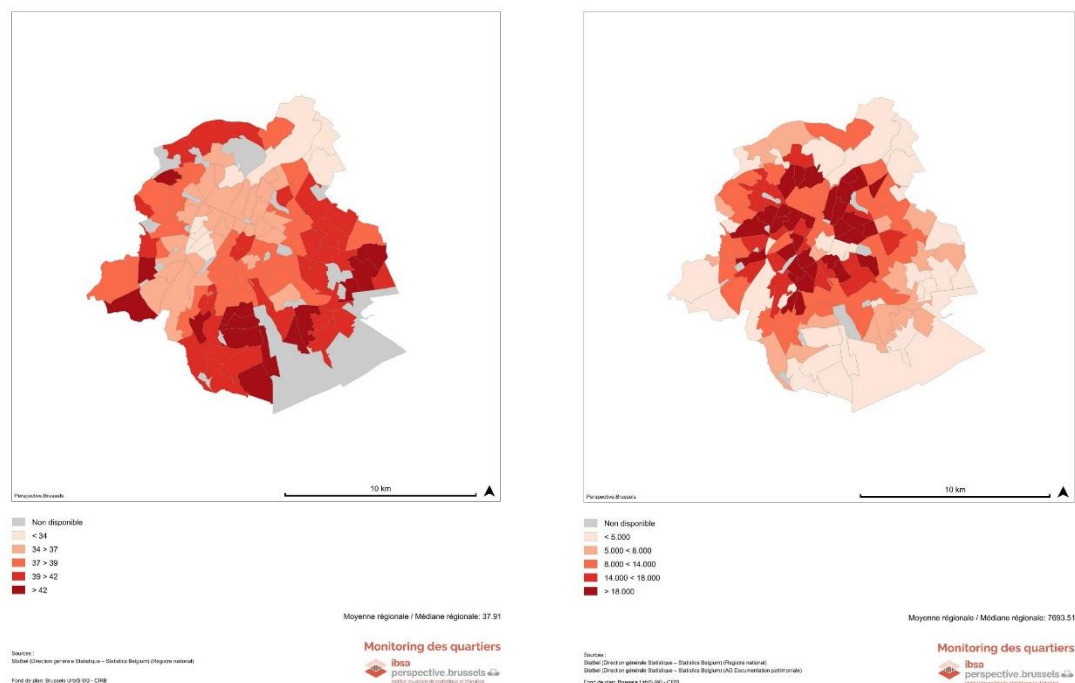


Figure 4 Average age (left) and population density (right) in Brussels in 2024 (BISA)

On a socio-economic note, the South Station district is located on the southern tip of the so-called ‘poor crescent’ (Fr: croissant pauvre), an area historically known for lower levels of income, education, and a high number of foreign-born immigrants, particularly from non-western countries. As can be seen in Figure 5, in 2021 the area was one of the areas with the highest unemployment rates as well as lowest employment rates.

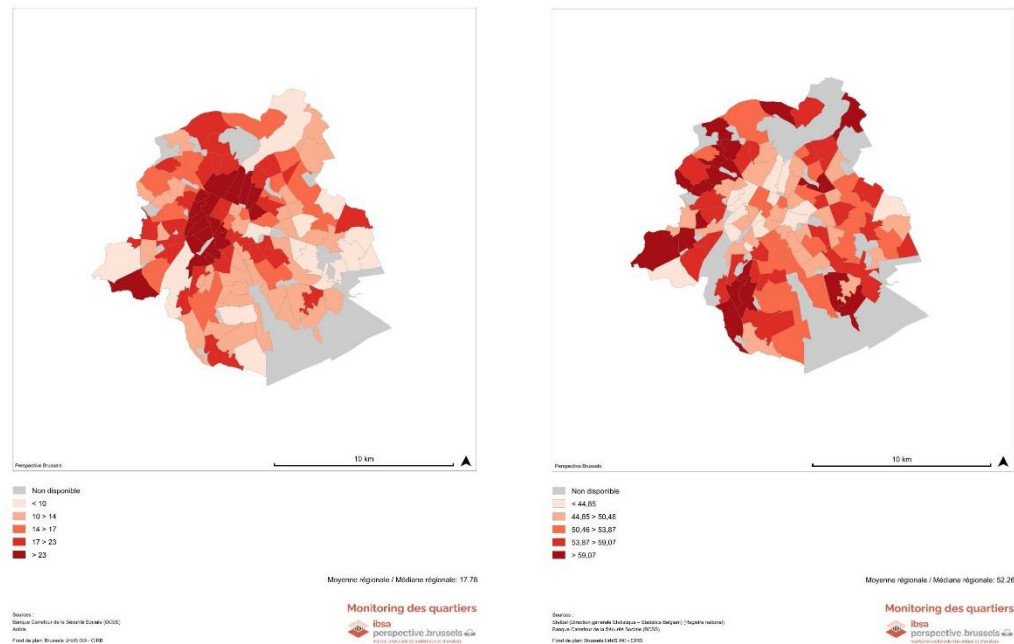


Figure 5 *Unemployment rate (left) and employment rate (right in Brussels in 2021 (BISA)*

Furthermore, in 2024, according to the migration breakdown by the Brussels institute for Statistics and Analysis, the immigration patterns show higher rates of immigrants from global regions such as North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America (Figure 6)

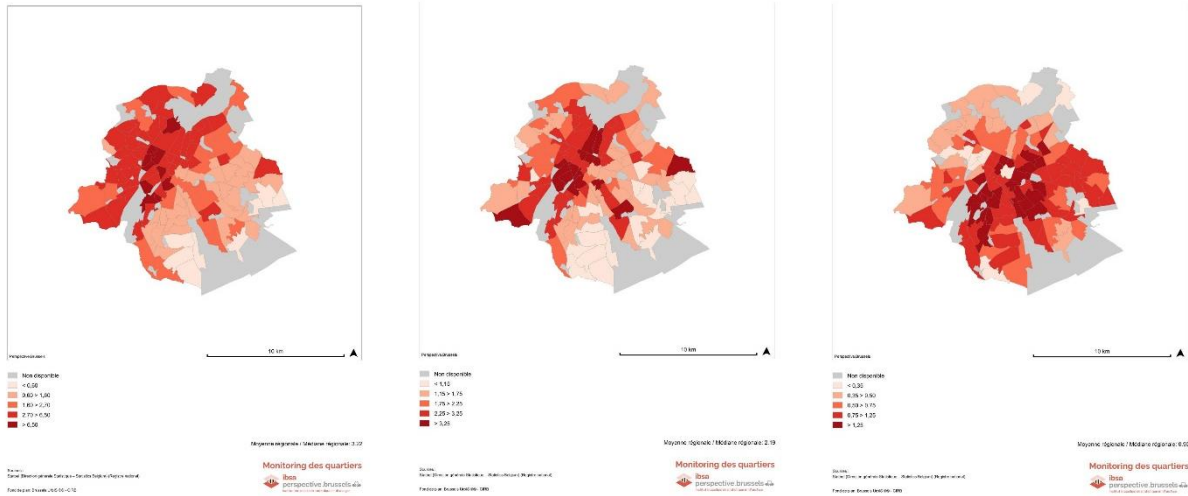


Figure 6 Rate of population from North Africa (left), Sub-Saharan Africa (middle), and Latin America (right) in Brussels in 2024 (BISA)

This is particularly striking when one examines the immigration numbers for people from Europe and OECD countries (Figure 7), which show either no distinct pattern or are concentrated in other parts of the city.



Figure 7 Rate of population from Europe 14, excluding Belgium (left), non-EU European countries (middle), and OECD countries (right) in Brussels in 2024 (BISA)

3.1.2 The South Station

The case study of this research entails the Brussels South Station, including both the station building and parts of the surrounding area of the building, as detailed below.

3.1.2.1 Building

The study covers the main waiting hall and shopping area, the South Gallery, the M Gallery, and the Horta Gallery (see Figure 8). The main focus is on the public areas and semi-public areas such as the commercial space of shops, cafes, and restaurants, as they can be freely frequented during opening hours. The metro station of the South Station will not be covered, as the character of publicness differs with the flow of travellers and the crowd regulation via the check-in gates at the entryway. The areas can be seen on the station floor plan below.

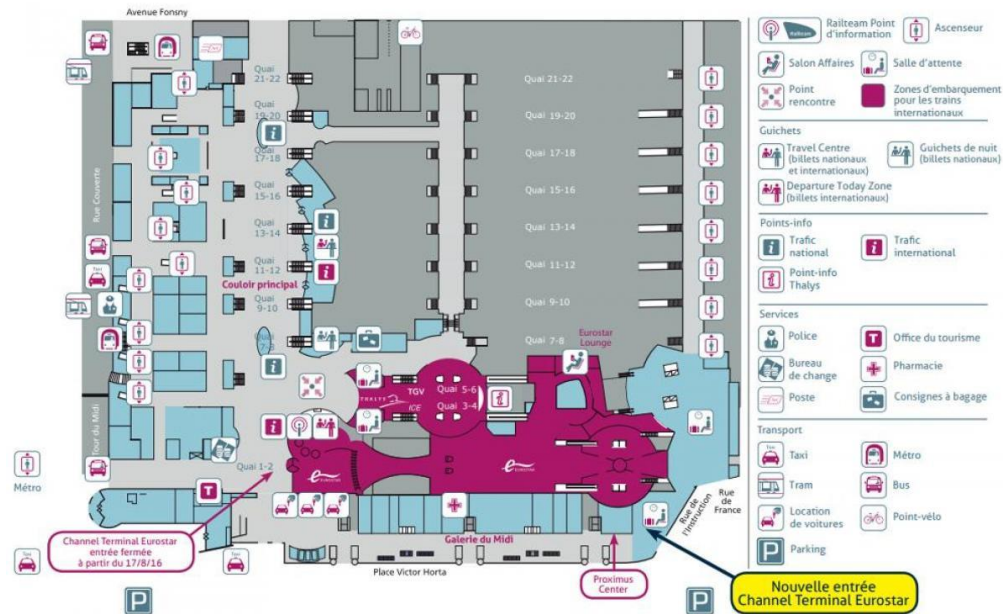
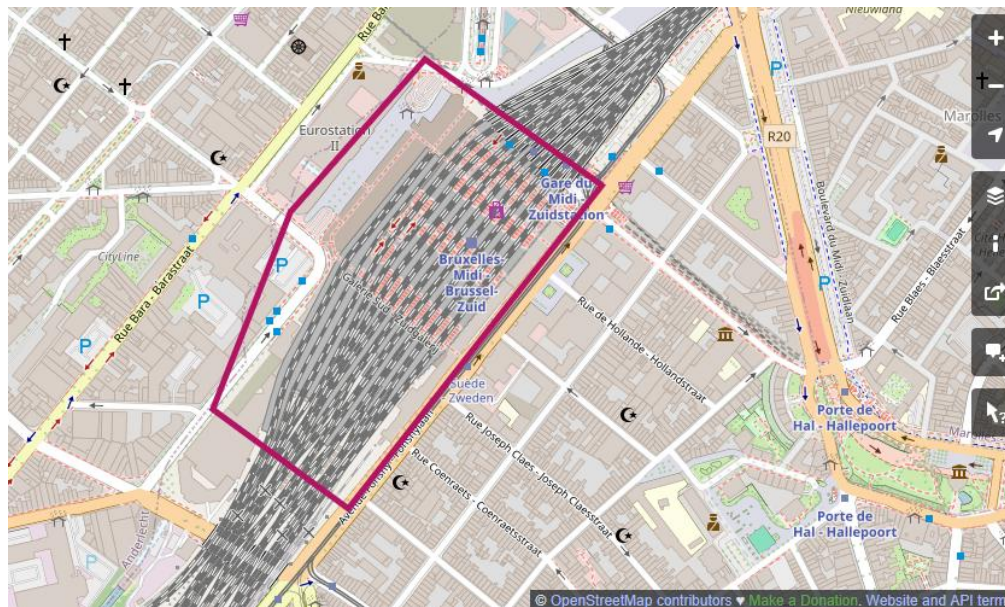


Figure 8 Map of station building of Brussels South Station (Maps Brussels, 2024)

3.1.2.2 Surrounding area

As the study focuses on feelings of security in public spaces where people might spend time rather than pass through, the surrounding areas chosen for the case study are the area by the tram stop under the bridge on the north-eastern side of the station, where a lot of non-travellers pass their time, and the space on the north-eastern side of the station covering a taxi bay, Victor Horta Square, with adjacent restaurant terraces.

In contrast, the southern/western parts of the surrounding area do not seem to be used for longer periods of time. The street below the southern bridge is a two-lane car street, and the tram stop Suède on Avenue Fosny is mostly used to get to and from the station and surrounding buildings - people spend more time at the Midi stop to transfer to other lines, where the bridge provides shelter from the weather.



3.2 Problem Statement

for developing security implementation. The research could further allow a deeper understanding of the role *familiar strangers* play in public spaces and could provide the basis of further research in this field.

The existing research covers, in majority, the mere existence of *familiar strangers* and their effect on crime on a larger scale. Against this backdrop, this exploratory research aims at finding the relationship between *familiar strangers* and feelings of security within the case study area of Brussels South Station. The research questions for the study were held broadly and had the goal of narrowing down the field and establishing the groundwork for future research.

The main research question was thus formulated: *What role do familiar strangers and recurring individuals play in the perceived security of Brussels South Station's daily users?*

This main question is supported by sub-questions that break down the research into more specific sections focusing on the underlying key concepts. For the exploration of *familiar strangers*, the questions are: *How do users of Brussels South Station define and recognize familiar strangers in their daily routines?* and *Which user groups encounter familiar strangers on a regular basis?* To dive deeper into the feelings of security and safety of the case study the questions are: *What factors contribute to a sense of security or insecurity among regular users of Brussels South Station?* and *What areas of the station are deemed particularly safe or unsafe by users of Brussels South Station?*

3.3 Process

This thesis presents an exploratory research loosely following grounded theory, an iterative fine tuning of research design and execution over time. This method is explained by Chun Tie et al. (2019), who describe six major steps that are interlinked and loop back to previous steps (see Figure 10). The process starts with purposive sampling, which builds the starting point of the research. What follows is the concurrent data collection and analysis, which consists of the following four steps: the generation and collection of data, as well as the initial, the intermediate, and the advanced coding steps. During all three of the latter, one is to code the latest data collections and identify concepts and refine the next round of data collection. This iterative process allows the use of inductive and deductive reasoning both in the collection and the analysis of the data. The constant comparative

analysis of the data and the coded concepts generate an accumulated and holistic framework by the end of the process, the grounded theory.

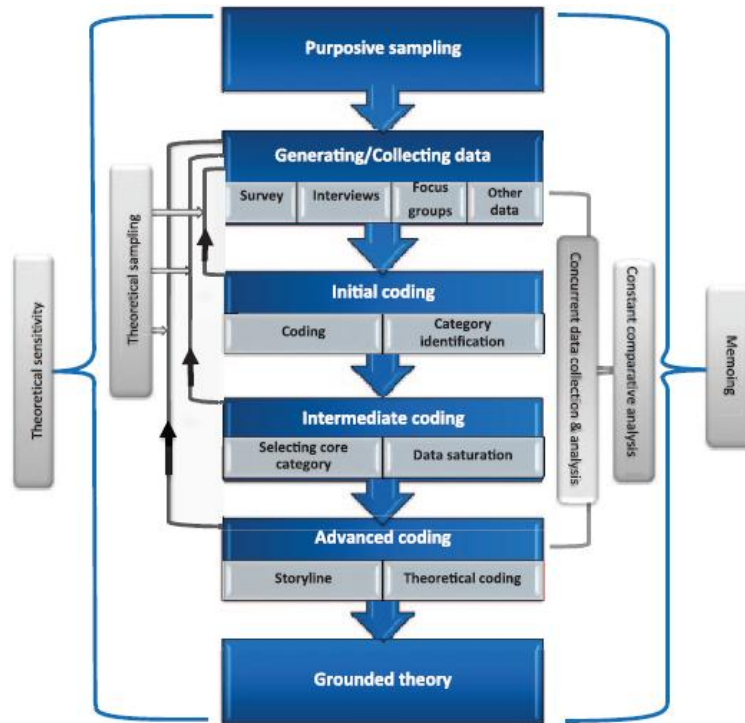


Figure 10 Grounded theory design framework (Chun Tie et al., 2019, p.3)

Qureshi and Ünlü (2020) both worked independently with grounded theory and criticised its complexity for novice users. In their paper, they introduced the ‘Ünlü-Qureshi Analysis Instrument’ which breaks down the interaction with the data and the coding process into different phases, allowing the user to gain a better understanding of the data over time. A visualisation of the Ünlü-Qureshi instrument can be seen in Figure 11. The authors presented two ways of adapting grounded theory in qualitative research. Their example study A went through several rounds of the entire coding instrument in a way that allows for the exploration of new concepts and the addition of new fields, while example study B executed the instrument in several stages leading to a refinement of the coding and checking the reliability of initial coding.



Figure 11 The ‘Ünlü-Qureshi Analysis Instrument’ (Qureshi and Ünlü, 2020, p.7)

For this study, I have taken the liberty of adapting grounded theory methodology to fit the needs of this explorative study. This means that I have adapted the rounds of data collection and coding into three phases that allow me to understand and refine my understanding of *familiar strangers* and their effect on feelings of security. The three phases have informed the research design and lead to an adjusted data collection in the following round of data collection as visualised below (Figure 12).

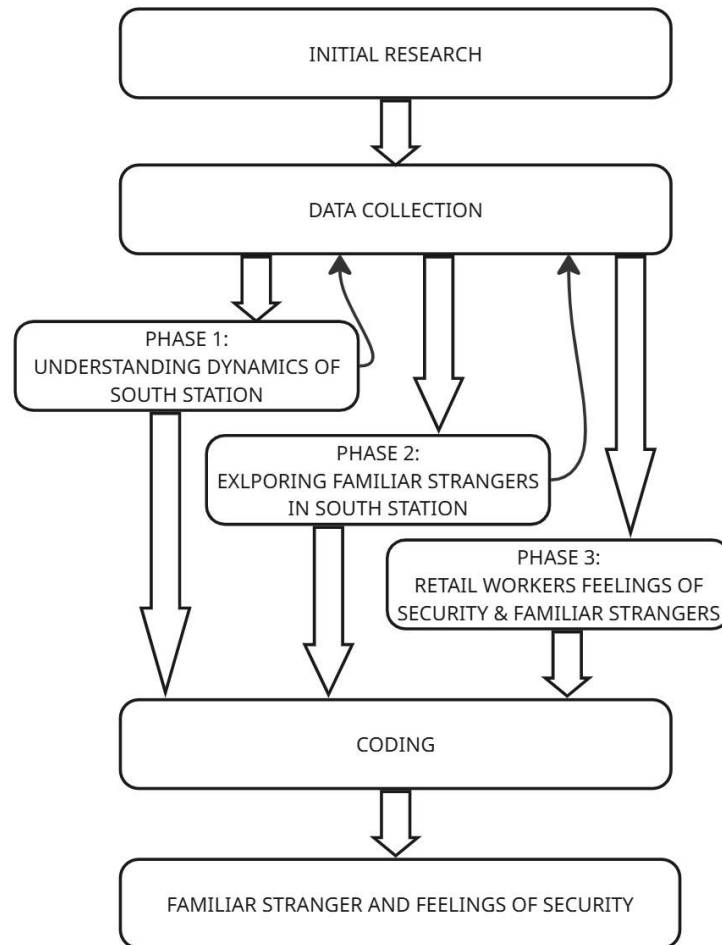


Figure 12 Grounded theory applied to this study (created by author)

The data coding itself follows more or less the logic of the coding procedure of the Ünlü-Qureshi instrument applied in the study A described in their paper (see Figure 13). The coding process is carried out several times for each phase of data collection to compare the data with the newly added points of interest and takeaways from added literature.

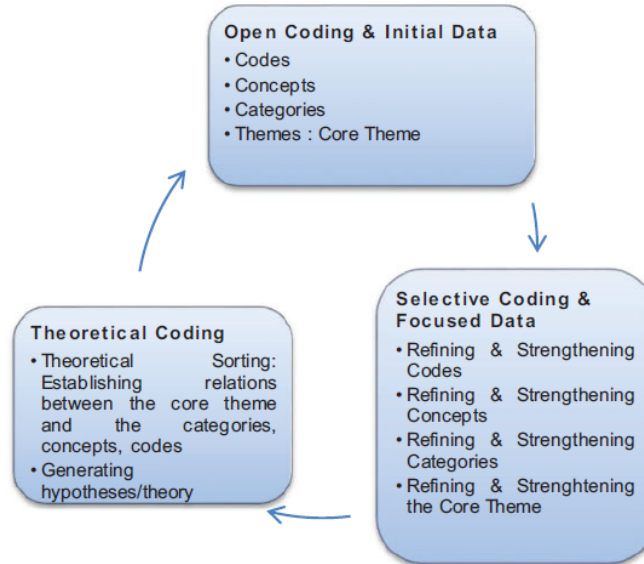


Figure 13 Coding procedure in study A (Qureshi and Ünlü, 2020, p.5)

3.4 Methodology

3.4.1 Data collection

The method chosen to answer the research question is a mix of qualitative methods as they are deemed to be suitable in cases where the researcher investigates a new field of Jamshed (2014). This mix consists of an extensive ethnographic study in the field and interviews with users of the selected case study station.

The ethnography included spending extended periods at various points in and around the station at different times of day. As Phillippi and Lauderdale (2018) put it, understanding the setting of one's study is crucial in order to provide rich context for the case study. To gather multifaceted records in the grounded theory process, I documented my impressions by keeping a field diary consisting of notes, sketches, audio recordings, and photos while in the field. These different recording methods were applied depending on the situation, both to get a whole image of the station and to avoid drawing attention to myself or making people surrounding me uncomfortable. Based on personal experience, audio recordings of impressions in particular might look more inconspicuous than note taking, especially when observing more vulnerable groups of station users. These digital recording methods are discussed in depth in the academic literature (see Tessier, 2012) but relistening to audio recordings allows the researcher to relive part of their experience through audio cues, as audio and

verbal information is processed differently from written information (Stocker & Close, 2013). The use of audio recordings thus provides additional depth to the fieldwork notes.

The other main method employed consisted of a series of interviews. Previous studies on individual perception of safety and security in various formats have preferred interviews, such as safety and security concerns in the workplace (Keys and Stichler, 2018), perceptions of school safety (Cobbina et al., 2020), and neighbourhood perceptions of safety (Lub and De Leeuw, 2017).

Although different interview types were considered, the semi-structured interview was chosen as it allows the interviewee to speak freely and expand on the points they deem important while also allowing the researcher to ask the relevant questions for their research (Alsaawi, 2014). As the process was readjusted in an ongoing manner in adherence with the grounded theory approach, the format of the interviews ranged from little informal talks with waiting passengers to full-length semi-structured interviews with stakeholders. The interview guide (see Appendix A) with a list of probing questions was made in advance of the first research phase and was later adjusted based on the insights of each research phase.

Along the recommended practice for interviews, each potential participant was given an explanation of the research and asked for consent of using their answers in this thesis (Alsaawi, 2014). As this research does not cover vulnerable subjects or topics, does not collect identifiable data, and the case study area is frequented by thousands of people every day I deemed verbal consent appropriate in this case. The interviews were recorded electronically where possible and later transcribed for further analysis. This depended on several factors, namely the context of the interview (pre-planned vs. spontaneous) and the consent given by participants. When the interview could not be recorded intensive notes were made during and after the interview for further analysis. This method of recording limits the accuracy of the interview but still allows for recording the main points made and gives enough data for exploratory research into a new field.

In the last research phase, the interview method was adapted to a survey derived from the guide using maps of the station and its surrounding areas to allow retail workers to annotate the maps on areas they felt exceptionally safe or unsafe in. The use of maps in qualitative research is regarded as a tool to allow participants to visually reflect on a topic, providing a snapshot into their lived experience (Wheeldon and Faubert, 2009). The use of a hard-copy base map as opposed to a blank page, is used to give participants a geographical reference, a method used in a study exploring

cyclists safety perceptions in Ireland (Manton et al., 2016). Further, this approach allowed respondents to talk freely about their feelings of security and safety while drawing on the map, without having the rigid setting of a formal interview. The same process of introducing the research and asking for consent was applied. Additionally, with the answers in the maps potentially revealing workplaces all respondents were assured that their maps would not be published individually.

All interviews that were attempted and conducted were logged for later analysis and will be discussed in the results section (see Chapter 4).

3.4.2 Sampling methods

As the population for this study is well defined by the nature of case study (see Chapter 3.1) and qualitative methods are applied the sampling method for this study falls under nonrandom sampling (Etikan & Bala, 2017a, 2017b). Over the course of the data collection process different sampling methods were planned and adapted. As a starting point I chose convenience sampling as laid out by Etikan et al. (2016) with users of the midi station willing to talk to me. During this step I aimed to fulfil the criteria of Total Population Sampling within purposive sampling. As the research process progressed, it became clear that there was both a low willingness to participate and a shift in research focus that led to a change in method. The changed research focus on certain user groups led to a deviation of my method towards the purposive sampling method of Typical Case Sampling (TCS) (Etikan et al., 2016; Etikan & Bala, 2017b). This means that within the chosen user groups I searched for typical cases that allow for a representative sample.

3.4.3 Data analysis

While Tessier (2012) raises the point that the transcription of audio files could be considered a first step of analysis (with the audio file being considered as the data), Maher et al. (2018) highlight that coding is the integral analytic process applied in grounded theory. As described in the process section of this chapter, the loop of constant comparison of collected data and the adaption for further data collection is essential in developing a sound understanding of the chosen research topic (Chun Tie et al., 2019; Qureshi & Ünlü, 2020). For this study the coding of the interview transcripts was carried out using the academic coding software NVivo. Maher et al. (2018) identify coding software such as NVivo as an important data management tool in qualitative coding. The coding process entails the identification of main concepts to explore further, as well as the recognition of patterns among the answers of the interview participants. The initial stage is the open coding, which

allows the researcher to pick up on patterns and concepts, both expected and unexpected, which build the basis for all further rounds of analysis (Chametzky, 2022; Maher et al., 2018). Based on the identified concepts, a list of codes is developed that helps in quantifying the patterns among the interview answers, as well as visualising them at a later stage.

Furthermore, the survey maps were combined into one map to analyse the spatial patterns of the feelings of security of users at the South Station. In a final step, the zones of insecurity and security are established.

3.5 Positionality

My own relationship with the Brussels South Station is that of a semi-regular user. I visit family or friends several times a year, and also go on regular day trips within Belgium, for which I take national or international trains from Brussels South Station, the closest station to where I live in Brussels. My personal background includes growing up in a former problem area of Berlin that is now gentrified. As an avid traveller who has lived abroad for several years, I am accustomed to taking trains across Europe and have spent hours at various stations, both in groups and alone. This meant that when I started the research, I perceived Brussels South Station as an average big train station. During my use of the train station, I never ventured beyond the waiting hall or the platforms I was using. I did not find Brussels South Station particularly safe or unsafe, nor did I ever think about it as a problematic or thriving area. Additionally, speaking all languages used in the announcements, French, English and German fluently, Dutch on an intermediate level, has always made me feel at ease and given me a sense of familiarity in the station.

3.6 Expectations and Limitations

Based on the existing literature it is expected that this research will provide the basis for future research on familiar strangers. It is expected that the list of relevant codes found during the analysis covers the concepts of feelings of safety including potential incidents that contributed to a lack thereof, views on and encounters with *familiar strangers*, as well as other experiences in and around Brussels South Station. The combination of grounded theory and qualitative interviews creates the ability to go in-depth into the topic and identify key elements of the impact of *familiar strangers* on feelings of security.

As Brussels is a major European city, the results are expected to be relevant and replicable in at least other European cities if not globally. The quantitative research conducted on familiar strangers in Asia and Australia in recent years have shown results similar to one another, which is owed to the dynamic nature of train stations regardless of geographical location (Liang et al., 2016; Zahnow, 2023; Zahnow et al., 2023).

The explorative nature of this research is bound to encounter a list of limitations. Firstly, the research is diving into a new field and thus can only draw from existing research to a certain extent. Then, there might be case specific limitations that are potentially related to a language barrier. I am not a native Brusseler or Belgian, thus some nuances of responses can get lost in translation. However, as this is not a technical or niche research this limitation is not deemed significant. Lastly, the use of qualitative methods is highly reliant on the willingness of users of the South Station to participate, so there is a risk of a low number sample for the interviews. This is however counterbalanced by the valuable insights gained by conducting qualitative research on this topic. Perceptions and feelings of security are best understood as individual descriptions which allow for corroboration of existing quantitative data with quotes.

4. Results

As outlined in the methodology chapter (see Chapter 3.4), the fieldwork was carried out in three phases visualised in Figure 14 between September 2024 and March 2025, owed to the time constraints of the academic year for this thesis. This chapter starts with a general impression and an overall analysis to give a more descriptive overview of the collected data. The following sections of the three research phases provide the results in detail with a critical reflection and linking of the three phases. The results are discussed in depth in the following chapter.



Figure 14 Research timeline following the grounded theory approach (created by author)

4.1 General overview

4.1.1 Overall impression

During the field visits, I experienced Brussels South Station as a busy station. The main waiting hall was filled with people at most times of the day (see Figure 15). I witnessed an increased number of people passing through during the morning and afternoon rush hours, but even outside these periods the amount of passengers was still high. In the morning, the coffee shops and bakeries had lines forming, while the few open retail shops, mostly selling chocolate and souvenirs, seemed to have lower customer numbers (see Figure 16). The part of the retail area, that consists of a food court and several restaurants, only opened up around noon, filled up quickly, and stayed busy until the

afternoon. The restaurants and brasseries in the Victor Horta Square remained calm until the afternoon and stayed open until the evening. While most people seemed determined to reach their destination, I witnessed people lingering at entries and exits, as well as at the tram stop. Likewise, several homeless people had installed themselves under the bridge near the tram stop.



Figure 15 *Main waiting hall*

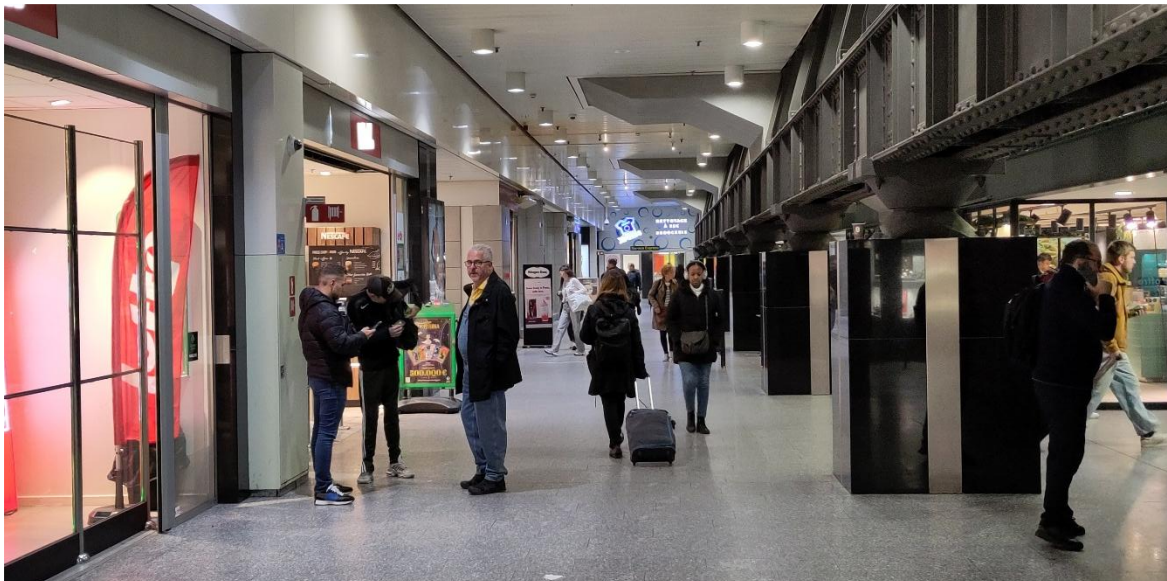


Figure 16 *Hallway in the retail area*

While spending extended periods of time in the main waiting hall of the station, I got the impression that a high number of maintenance workers are employed at the South Station. I saw many cleaners,

workers, and security staff from Securail or Securitas patrolling on a regular basis. Overall, the people using the benches in the seating areas often seemed relaxed and calm, most of them were using their phones or eating and drinking while seated, sometimes at the same time.

4.1.2 Overall patterns

The overall analysis and comparison of the collected data was carried out with the coding software NVIVO 14. The data uploaded to NVIVO comprised 14 files - 12 were detailed notes from interviews (4 informal, 1 mid-length, 7 survey interviews) and 2 transcripts from long-format interviews. The coding is clustered into four themes or code families. The respective coding families are divided into individual codes as visualised below in Figure 17. The four themes are structured as follows.

The theme 'Security and Safety' covers

- security patterns, which include times and locations where respondents felt more or less safe;
- feelings of (in)security, which consist of their general feelings on the station and their reasoning;
- incidents, and their descriptions;
- and behaviour in response to insecurity.

The theme 'Measures' is divided into

- securitisation, meaning the interventions made to improve the security at the station;
- and police, as in both the presence of police officers and the installation of the police station.

The theme 'Perception of the station' contains

- Threats, which are the instances and people that the respondents perceived as threatening;
- and media image, as discussed by respondents.

Lastly, the theme 'People' consists of

- familiar strangers, being recounts of experiences with familiar strangers;
- and people/crowds, referring to the presence of people in general.

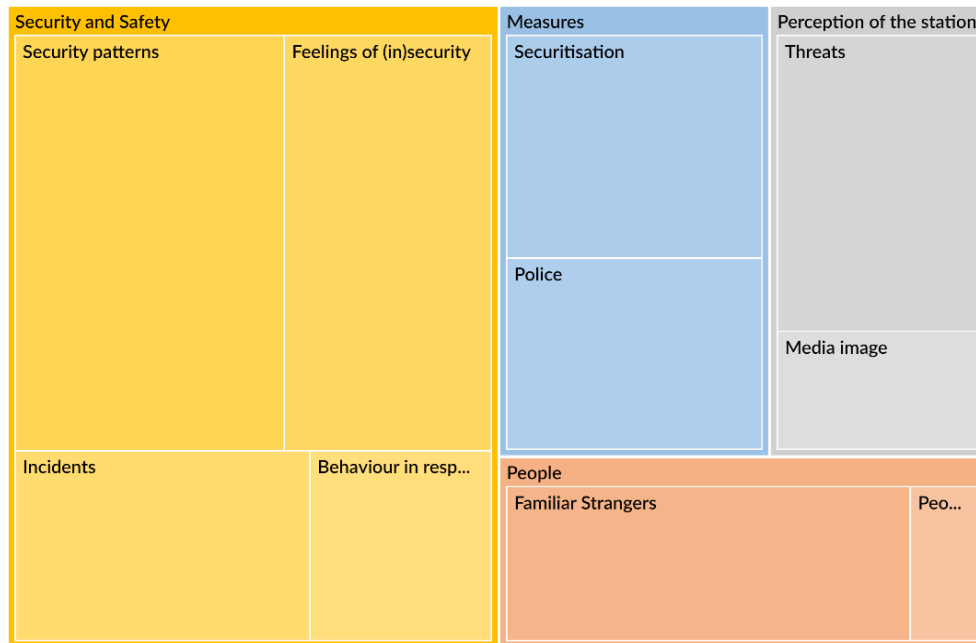


Figure 17 Coding families (created by author, generated in NVivo)

Figure 17 shows, on the one hand, the number of coding references or the instances a concept or term was covered by a respondent, and on the other hand, shows how many items - or respondent files - included a reference to that code. The code families are clearly linked to the questions asked in the specific interviews. The questionnaires for the respective interviews can be seen in Appendix A.

A total of 134 references were coded across the 10 codes. The highest number of references is made for security patterns (26) and feelings of (in)security (20). Coincidentally, both of these codes have the highest number of items coded, with 12 and 13 respondents respectively. The lowest number of reports were made on the general presence of people or crowds (3), the station's media image (6), and the descriptions of behaviour change in response to insecurity (8). However, concerning the latter, the people recounting their behavioural changes did so with several references, as illustrated by the respondent to reference ratio of 3 to 8.

It is important to note that all respondents were asked about *familiar strangers* but only the ones having something to say about them have been coded here, which means 4 of the respondents did not give a substantial answer.

Table 1 Overview coding references and coded items

Codes		Number of coding references	Number of items coded
Measures	Police	12	8
	Securitisation	14	8
People	Familiar Strangers	17	10
	People_Crowds	3	3
Perception of the station	Media image	6	5
	Threats	15	9
Security and Safety	Behaviour in response to insecurity	8	3
	Feelings of (in)security	20	13
	Incidents	13	9
	Security patterns	26	12
Total		134	Min:3 Max: 13

4.2 Research phases

4.2.1 Research phase 1

The first phase lasted from the start of the academic year in September to November 2024. The methods employed during this phase included several field visits to conduct field ethnographic research, as well as brief informal interviews with general station users.

I conducted five specific field visits to cover different areas of the station. First, in September I conducted a perimeter walk to get acquainted with the station and its surroundings beyond my knowledge of it as a traveller. I identified the different areas and assessed the less busy ones. The areas were the main hall, subdivided into the waiting area and the retail area, the Zuid gallery and the M gallery, the tram stop Gare du Midi, and Avenue Fosny with the tram stop Suède. Upon this perimeter walk, Avenue Fosny and the Zuid and M galleries, and the Horta Square were deemed unlikely to work for conducting interviews, as people were mostly passing rather than spending time. The main waiting hall in the train station building, as well as the retail area, seemed to have a high volume of users.

In October, there were two field visits, the first one of which covered a more detailed ethnography of the areas deemed of lesser interest during the perimeter walk. Out of the four areas, only the Horta Square seemed of interest and was noted as such. Avenue Fosny, and the Zuid and M galleries were mostly empty. The second field visit in October was conducted in the main waiting hall. I observed the general atmosphere and noticed the presence of security personnel from different security companies, namely Securitas and Securail. In my notes, I wrote down sentences such as “I see another team of safety personnel - two police people (1m, 1f) walk past them - one with coffee in hand.”

The visit concluded with an attempt to conduct informal interviews or talks with people in the waiting area. The prevalent use of phones and headphones posed a difficulty in approaching people who were not paying attention to their surroundings. While about 15 people were approached, the majority were either unwilling to talk or felt they could not be of help, as they did not know anything about the station. Only four of the people approached were willing to talk to me. An overview of their characteristics can be found in Table 6 in Appendix B. Further, all quotes listed can be found in English and their original language in Table 9, Appendix C. All first contact was made in French, but I offered to talk in English or German, if the person did not speak French.

Only one of the respondents identified as a regular user of the station, while the other three said they were rare visitors, with two of them not living in Brussels. In this small sample, it became clear that the women expressed more feelings of insecurity about the station than the men. Respondent 2, a young woman in her twenties, was sitting with her child on a bench, and when asked about her impression of the station, she said, “There are a lot of homeless people.” During this interaction, a seemingly homeless person sat down on the same bench as her, even though the surrounding

benches were free, and another person came up to her mid-talk to ask for a cigarette, which she happily gave away. She further explained that the drunk people in the surrounding area make her uncomfortable, and she would feel safer if there were fewer homeless people around (see Figure 18). Lastly, she said the security personnel (a few of them were in sight, smoking at the entry to the waiting hall) make her feel more secure, but the introduction of the police station does not impact her feelings of security. Respondent 1, an older woman, expressed a similar view in that she deems the surrounding area unsafe but feels safe in the vicinity of the waiting hall. She disclosed her process of planning her travels in advance and buying her tickets a day before the trip, as well as arriving hours in advance of departure. She also talked about the validity of media reports on homeless men in the area and said that there are several loitering around the bus stop she uses, and that they had knives on them. She claimed this as one of the reasons she avoids traveling at night. Concerning security staff and the police station, she explained that they do not make her feel particularly safe and she prefers to rely on her own vigilance, such as listening to announcements and watching her surroundings.



Figure 18 *Underpass tram station on the North-Eastern side of Brussels South Station (by author)*

Both men questioned about their relationship with the South Station stated that they were rare users. Respondent 3 said he mainly changes trains at the South Station and does not venture outside the building. He told me that security and safety are not a concern during his travels or train changes at South Station and added that he does not follow any media reports on it, although he seemed vaguely familiar with the stigma. In a similar vein, respondent 4 reported feeling safe in the station and simply registering security personnel, but not really thinking about them further. He added that, in contrast

to his home country, the United States of America, he would be concerned if he started seeing armed security staff patrolling around the station, as the gun laws in Europe are quite strict. Lastly, he declined to discuss the general image of the stations and media reports any further with the explanation “I am not in the station often enough to give an accurate opinion.”

None of the four respondents had heard of the *familiar strangers* before and neither did any of them think that seeing *familiar strangers* would impact their feelings of security at all.

In addition to the informal talks, I tried to obtain contact information for a few nearby businesses but was referred to senior management and either given dates and times to return or an email address to contact. This was further followed up in research phase 2.

In November, two more field visits were conducted, one at the bus stop and taxi bay, and the other again in the main waiting hall of the station. The observations around the bus and taxi bay were similar to those in the galleries of the station building. The people here seemed determined to get on their buses and only a few chose to wait in the area of the sidewalk instead of the main waiting hall. I approached about eight to ten travellers (including two groups) and three workers with the different bus companies but none of them agreed to an interview. A similar pattern of people not willing or not feeling able to contribute emerged here. The majority of the bus passengers were tourists, and the bus workers were mainly preoccupied with their work and felt uncomfortable making arrangements for a later time for an interview. The switch to the taxi bay yielded similar results with some of the taxis being empty or the drivers taking a break in their car. Three were approached over the span of 20 minutes, but two were not interested at all and one did not want to talk about the topic of security.

The second field visit in the main hall was an observation over the span of an hour, where I took the time to take notes for one minute every ten minutes. Notable quotes from my field notes include sentences like “The various people passing range from a woman in business attire and heels to men in sneakers and hoodies, from many travellers w/ small suitcases to people passing pushing a scooter/folding bike along.” and “A young SNCB worker is helping some travellers find their platform - they announced a change a couple of minutes ago, maybe that’s it.”

During this field visit, I attempted to observe security measures and the behaviour of people in the seating area (see Figure 19). Many people positioned their bags on their laps or in sight on the floor in front of them. The majority of people appeared to be less vigilant, as they were mostly on their

phones or eating and drinking, often while using headphones. In addition, I counted two people using their laptops balanced on their laps.



Figure 19 Seating in main waiting hall

Overall, in this research phase, I identified one main pattern: the majority of users at Brussels South Station are not regular visitors and therefore cannot attest to the presence of *familiar strangers*. This meant that I needed to adjust my data collection approach and either focus on user groups that spend more time at the station or seek insights from other stakeholders regarding the security situation at the South Station.

4.2.2 Research phase 2

Thus, the second phase of data acquisition, spanning from December 2024 to mid-February 2025, was spent trying to reach other stakeholders from around the station for formal interviews. Additionally, upon feedback throughout the midterm poster presentation for this thesis project in January 2025, retail workers were identified as a group of regular users who spend time at fixed places within the station, and interviews were attempted with them. Lastly, given the mention of media in the informal talks conducted in phase 1, a short media analysis was carried out.

There was an effort to contact a variety of stakeholders, including security personnel, press, police, social workers, and a hotel chain, between December 2024 and February 2025. I made seven official requests via email in French, and in case for the Police Local Midi via the contact form. The other police stations in the police zones nearby (St-Gilles/Sint-Gillis and Anderlecht) could not be contacted as the contact form software of the Brussels police did not allow for similar requests to be sent in by the same person. However, through another contact within the Brussels police, I made a second request by email which was forwarded to someone working in the vicinity of the South Station. An additional request to Securail was attempted upon recommendation from Securitas but they could not provide a contact beyond the emergency phone number, which led me to refrain from trying to follow up on that front.

As can be seen below (see Table 2), overall, one organisation did not have the appropriate contact information, two organisations denied interview requests immediately, two requests were never answered, and three requests initially received a positive response, but the contact was not reciprocated at a later stage.

Table 2 Overview contacted stakeholders

Organisation	Function	Status
Police Local Midi	Police	Denied in February 2025
Police (general)	Police	Contact via employee in a centre location in December 2024, forwarded and no response
Securitas	Security staff	Denied in February 2025
Press SNCB	Journalist	Contacted in January, February 2025, No answer
Diogenes	Social workers	Positive answer in March, but no midi employee available for interview
Hotel Pullman	HoReCa	Contacted in February 2025, No answer
Police des chemins de fer de la police fédérale	Police	Positive answer in early March 2025, no response in late March
Securail	Security	No contact available beyond emergency phone number

In addition to the formal interview requests to different organisations, I approached regular users such as workers and commuters in the station building. Out of about a dozen people approached, three initially agreed to an interview, but only two of those could be carried out eventually, one being pushed back into March, but thematically still belonging to phase 2. One commuter was reached through a personal network and agreed to an interview. Similar to the informal interview attempts during phase 1, the main reasons for denying the interview requests were time and topic for commuters, and time and insecurity by retail workers. Several of the latter also referred to senior management in fear of breaking company policies. Those who denied the interview due to the subject matter either felt they had nothing relevant to say or did not feel comfortable talking about it. The overview of the interview respondents during phase 2 is listed in Table 7 in Appendix B.

In December of 2024, I conducted a semi-structured walk-along interview with respondent 5, a male commuter in his early 30s, at Brussels South Station. The walk started at the Zuid gallery entry near the tram stop Suède on Avenue Fosny, circled in the retail area of the main waiting hall, and led via the Horta Square back to the Zuid gallery. The interviewee explained that he lives in the area near the station and started using it regularly in summer 2024 to commute to work, in addition to occasional trips to and from his home country. He explained that he has mixed feelings about the station district of the South Station in Brussels, deeming it safer than Frankfurt Hauptbahnhof but less so than Prague Hlavní Nádraží. When he first moved to Brussels, and during visits even before that, the area seemed very unsafe to him and now that he is used to it, he feels more secure overall:

“And generally, I was genuinely quite scared of this place. And even when I moved to Brussels, I, like at the beginning, I was... especially in like, late hours, I was preparing bike routes home that don't go to the area, some of the alternatives. Yeah, the more I think, it looks and feels a bit worse than it actually is.”

This quote clearly shows the interviewees' avoidant behaviour in response to his feelings of insecurity. While his familiarity allows him to assess the situation in his perceived insecurity differently, he still explains that he is alert and has his guard up.

He further acknowledged that certain aspects of the station make it an uncomfortable place people might not want to spend more time at than necessary. He mentioned that the size and layout can be confusing, especially to those not familiar with it. Additionally, he contrasted the times of day and night, describing night as 'more unsafe' and daytime as 'unpleasant'. He linked the fear at night to the lower number of people in and around the station and pointed out that the areas where intoxicated people hang out can be frightening and evoke fear, even more so at night. This is illustrated by the following:

“In the evening, it's just kind of like, it feels very sketchy, just like, you know, like very... there's some sketchy people walking around. Probably also some people who are perfectly fine, but it's just like, in this environment, you're a bit suspicious of everyone and everything.”

He conceded to a certain prejudice of certain demographics, homeless and intoxicated people. An additional quote further extends this anticipation of an incident:

“And yeah, I guess, like, have more people that are intoxicated in one way or the other, and then you can never be sure how people could act potentially. It's not like they would necessarily - like most of them wouldn't, but it's just there is this bit of a feeling like, maybe someone will, like, click on the wrong side and, yeah, if I'm standing alone somewhere, and, you know, waiting around, yeah, okay, feel a bit like looking around instead of trying to like chill.”

Both of these quotes are good examples of how feelings of safety are correlated with an absence of incidents, meaning the perceived chance of an incident leads to a feeling of unsafety. When asked about actual incidents, he responded that he never witnessed anything he would describe as such, only commotions across the street or what he deemed ‘uncomfortable situations’ or ‘sketchy incidents’, but no situations in which he felt his wellbeing was at risk. When the conversation shifted to the media reporting on the station, he held a nuanced view of the headlines being published, as they can confirm people’s experiences and reinforce the negative image of the stigma, but also give them hope for improvement.

“Of course, it may be helping in some regards, when you read about, like, high crime statistics around the station and so on. But quite often, I just kind of assume that it's well, either like some agenda behind that, or just kind of lazy sensation seeking journalism. I mean, there's, there has been this talk about, like, cleaning up the station, but also, there have been like, just plain incidents, like the stabbing, shooting, the other stabbing. So, I feel like those I have heard getting like, brought up. I guess those are the sites where media would exacerbate some people's security. But also, I think it's like, especially before I had, like, lots of my own personal experience, it's also just like little evidence of people [...] and how they feel about the place that most of them would not have great things to say. Lots of them, like, actively avoid the area or station.”

While respondent 5 clearly has a nuanced view on the media reports, there appears to be a link between his admission of avoiding certain groups at the station and these reports. While the listing of serious incidents seems rather dismissive, he still has internalised these ones, one could argue.

When asked about media reports beyond incidents, such as motions to try and revitalise the area and develop some of the nearby empty land, he was unsure if this would bring lasting change. He listed root causes such as homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse, and the general state of the Brussels social welfare system that would need interventions. He explained that the station is a transit place you pass through and do not stay in for most people, only leaving those in the vicinity who do not have anywhere else to go. In his experience, most residents do not spend time in the area, and even if the development of the area created more residential places, it would be a “plaster over the problem rather than resolving it”. Additionally, he felt it could impact local dynamics like the ‘midi market’ that he appreciates.

During the interview, he acknowledged how the area has impacted his own behaviour, such as using a rental bike from Villo instead of locking his own at the station, or using a car-sharing car from Poppy when arriving late at night, outside the public transport’s operating hours. In a similar vein, he would seek out busier areas like the main waiting hall if a bus or train is delayed, as having people around gives him a safer feeling. However, he mentioned that only a higher number of people in general caused this feeling of security and the presence of security personnel does not impact it. When asked to elaborate he said upon reflection that he sees having trained people around as useful in case of a violent incident but also criticised certain policing strategies against peaceful homeless people:

“Like, quite often it would be that there is a homeless person sitting inside the building and they will, like, just expel them outside. That's like... Maybe it improves the feeling of security for me on some levels. But, if it comes at this cost of it, like this is not really helping anything.”

Lastly, as he mostly heads straight to the platform when using the station, he did only mention one beggar at the entryway as a potential *familiar stranger*, in addition to recognising some people, like fellow commuters or certain conductors, on the platform. He stated that they do not influence his perception of safety, which aligns with the sentiment expressed by the first four respondents during research phase 1.

I conducted two interviews with retail workers in February and March 2025, both interviews were conducted in French. The first interview was with a female retail worker in her twenties, who started her job two months prior, and occurred at her workplace in the retail area of the station. Respondent 6 disclosed that she had preconceived notions about the station and has never felt entirely safe

working there, which she explicitly linked to the media coverage of violent incidents and general hearsay in her social circle. She added that she feels even less safe at closing time: “Ah, it’s scary in the evening.”. In addition, the respondent explained that while she recognises some of the workers of the surrounding shops by face or name, her main *familiar strangers* are the ones that come to steal, calling them “thieves we know by face”. This was the first of several mentions of the recognition of thieves or vandals down the line and is an aspect not yet covered in the research on *familiar strangers*.

In light of these incidents, respondent 6 expressed hope that nothing further would happen beyond theft, especially given the location of the shops, not very far from the police station. She also mentioned a colleague who had recently requested a transfer to a different shop location due to repeated altercations. Describing the short time frame - running in, grabbing products, fleeing - she realised that neither of the security services could do much to prevent these thefts, but she still wished for further measures such as automatic locking systems of the doors with the push of a button.

The second retail interview with respondent 7 was an online interview via video call in March. Respondent 7 is a part-time retail worker in his 20s, whom I approached at the South Station, who agreed to talk to me outside his work hours. He explained that he had worked in the station location of his company for just over a year, but had worked in another location in the city before, and added that in a typical week, he was working about 20 hours in different shifts during the opening times between about 8 am and 7 pm. Firstly, he noted that he did not witness particular problems occur but did not consider the station a safe area:

“Never any problems, but I still feel that there's an atmosphere that's very, very, very difficult. You still have to be careful with your belongings, you still have to look to the right, to the left. So, I would say, I would say, we still don't feel safe.”

When going into more detail on his working experience he explained that the shop location with the doors facing the main waiting area evokes a more secure feeling when potential witnesses are sitting in the vicinity, “So, we say to ourselves that there are witnesses.”.

This mixed view alludes to a clear internalised fear of incidents that he does not openly share. Respondent 7 first explained not running into any problems in the station, but clearly explained

feelings of unease and insecurity. This is similar to the attitude exhibited by respondent 5, who played down any incidents he witnessed as commotions and did not think they were noteworthy.

Respondent 7 provided further details about the shop's security measures that enhance his sense of security, including an emergency button that workers can use to alert security personnel and the various security companies stationed within the station. When asked about *familiar strangers* he said he recognised some of them and also remembered several being customers in his shop. His familiarity with other people mirrored the experiences of respondent 6 and he also said that he recognised other workers on break when buying lunch at their places. He mentioned the creation of a sense of community within the workers as they face similar challenges:

“Afterwards, there are faces that we sometimes recognize, I know that when I go to [the restaurant] or [the restaurant] I pretty much recognize the faces. So, there you go. And then when we say I work in the station, we generally get a discount, it's not variable 5 or 10 percent, right away. It also creates a feeling of connection. Let's say. Because we live, we live the same daily life more or less, we work in the station.”

When discussing the addition of the police station, he conceded that it feels reassuring to him and his colleagues, but also acknowledged the limited influence the police actually have. He cited a conversation he had with a police officer who explained that they cannot pursue people causing problems any further if they do not carry identification.

“And even if these people start again the next day, all those who smoke crack, for example, will. That's it, that's it, that, unfortunately, there is a situation where, legally, even the police can't do anything with all these people. So, there you go. I know there are limits to what can be done.”

Lastly, he further reflected on the need for intervention in the whole neighbourhood and that the security staff and police could not offer any long-lasting change. He expressed his discomfort when passing surrounding areas such as the tram stop Suède or walking through the Rue d'Angleterre. According to him, there are some bars and shops where people get drunk and sometimes get into altercations. Once more, he highlighted that he never encountered any problems himself and does not feel that he is in actual danger and just needs to walk swiftly with an eye on his surroundings.

The interviews in phase 2 brought to light that the two male respondents have a tendency of downplaying incidents and uncomfortable situations. This was contrasted by the openness of

respondent 6 and the respondents 1 and 2 from research phase 1. They disclosed their fear without hesitation and without diminishing it. Nevertheless, the given examples from the respondents draw a pattern. There are repeated reports of incidents involving intoxicated people and part of the homeless or undocumented people who spend time around the station. Again, this expands on the interaction with respondent 2 from research phase 1, who, while being interviewed, was approached by a seemingly homeless person.

Another repeated issue is the disbelief in the newly reopened police station (Chini, 2024c; The Brussels Times Newsroom, 2023, 2024c). The respondents, on the one hand, do not feel any impact on their day-to-day lives by the heightened police presence, and on the other hand, exhibit doubts on the effectiveness of the police station. The police station and increased police patrol do not actually keep thefts and commotions from happening, and in the cases where the police are able to intervene in a timely manner, they often cannot resolve the issue but only remove a person from the premises for a short period of time. This means that the root causes of the main issues, drug and alcohol abuse and homelessness, are not tackled.

As the area of the South Station is highly stigmatised in the public eye, mentioned by several respondents (see respondents 5, 6), I conducted a brief media analysis. The following table provides a short media overview using The Brussels Times, Brussels' largest English-language daily news media as an example (The Brussels Times, 2025). This overview has been conducted to compare the overall number of articles on the Brussels South Station to the number of negative headlines, incidents, and updates on the police station.

Using the search function on the website of the Brussels Times with the terms 'midi', 'midi station', and 'south station', the list in Table 3 has been created for articles published on the South Station in 2024. The overall search showed 20 articles with one of the search terms in the headline. As can be seen below, three of them covered the establishment of the police station within the station building, four talked about the area as an overall problem area, eight discussed violent incidents that happened in the incidents and only five articles covered other, somewhat neutral topics on the general area and its development.

Table 3 Overview of The Brussels Times articles mentioning Brussels South Station in their titles in 2024

Police Station	"By end of summer': Long-awaited Brussels Midi police station confirmed' (Chini, 2024c)
	'Police station in Brussels-Midi misses deadline, but will 'open in the coming weeks'' (The Brussels Times Newsroom, 2024c)
	"More cooperation needed', says Minister at opening of Brussels-Midi police station' (Chini, 2024f)
Midi Problem Area	'Belgium in Brief: Fixing the Midi can of worms' (Whitehead, 2024)
	'Mayors call for improved security at Brussels' Gare du Midi' (The Brussels Times with Belga, 2024b)
	'Saint-Gilles Mayor hits back at criticism of Brussels-Midi' (Carolan, 2024b)
	'SNCB chief asked to help deal with crime around Brussels-Midi station' (Carolan, 2024a)
Midi Violent incidents	'Brussels-Midi shooting: No arrests yet, victims of attack believed to be collateral' (The Brussels Times Newsroom, 2024a)
	"Blood everywhere': Stabbing in Brussels-Midi station, one person injured' (Chini, 2024a)
	'Drug-related violence: Brussels-Midi police zone reinforced by special security unit' (The Brussels Times Newsroom, 2024d)
	'Man shot in café near Brussels-Midi' (The Brussels Times with Belga, 2024c)
	'Police appeal for witnesses after fatal Brussels-Midi shooting' (The Brussels Times with Belga, 2024a)
	'One person injured in stabbing at Brussels-Midi station' (The Brussels Times with Belga, 2024d)
	'Shots fired in Midi 'hit-and-run': No injuries, one person arrested' (The Brussels Times Newsroom, 2024e)
	Two killed and three injured in shooting near Brussels-Midi station (The Brussels Times Newsroom, 2024b)

Midi general	'Brussels North and Midi stations are driving away foreign investors, experts warn' (O'Regan, 2024)
	'Less traffic, more cafés: Boulevard Jamar near Midi station to get green makeover' (Chini, 2024e)
	'Brussels-Midi station reimagined from 'no-man's-land' to key meeting place' (Chini, 2024b)
	'Brussels-Midi station: 18-storey tower for affordable housing on its way' (Walker, 2024b)
	'Taxi drivers protest closure of parking spaces around Brussels-Midi' (The Brussels Times with Belga, 2024e)

While the South Station is an area of interest to developers and holds important community events such as the Marché du Midi, the majority of the headlines highlight the negative aspects of the station district. This is understandable for the description of the violent incidents. However, some of the wordings used in the other headlines resonate very negatively. For example, the headline 'Brussels North and Midi stations are driving away foreign investors, experts warn' implies that the station and its problems are at fault for discouraging investors rather than governments and policy makers. Parallel, the headline "By end of summer': Long-awaited Brussels Midi police station confirmed' makes it seem like the majority of the population and users of the South Station district were audibly in favour of the reopening of the police station.

4.2.3 Research phase 3

The third research phase was carried out between mid-February 2025 and the end of March 2025. The adapted interview method in this phase was an informal survey with a printed-out map. The respondents were asked which areas in the South Station they perceive as particularly dangerous or safe. With the survey conducted directly at the workplace of the retail workers, the map presented a basis for starting a conversation about the respondents' feelings of security. Further, I could offer to fill out the map for those who were more hesitant about it, which lowered the threshold of participation compared to previous attempts. Around ten people were approached with a map, and eight agreed to participate, among them two pairs of colleagues. Respondents 11 and 12 engaged in the discussion together, and respondents 13 and 14 filled out one map together. During the

conversation with the respondents, I took detailed notes and wrote down some quotes. Table 8 in Appendix B lists the respondents to the map survey.

The main aim of the survey was to identify the areas within and around the station that the retail and HoReCa (hotel, restaurants, cafés) workers consider to be particularly safe or unsafe. Out of the eight respondents, all five female respondents reported that they did not feel safe at all in or around the station. Respondents 13 and 14 even alluded to the fact that they had the security staff on speed dial (“Our favourite number is the security’s”). Out of the remaining three, respondents 8 and 9 both noted that they were aware of issues but personally did not feel very affected by it. Respondent 12 acknowledged a general feeling of insecurity in the discussion but remained the only respondent to mark a safe zone on his map.

The map below (Figure 20) shows the zones the survey respondents marked as particularly safe or unsafe. As can be seen, all the entries and exits have been marked at least by two different people, and the toilet facilities have been marked as the unsafest zones with five mentions. In conversation, the majority of the respondents described the entries and exits as areas that beggars and intoxicated people often frequent. Respondents 13 and 14 added that the exit zone facing the metro station and the retail area is often used as a hang out spot by youth on Wednesday afternoons and that they felt threatened by gangs of young men hanging around.

The only safe zone mentioned is the retail area facing the main waiting hall, mentioned by one respondent whose workplace and thus his colleagues are in this area.

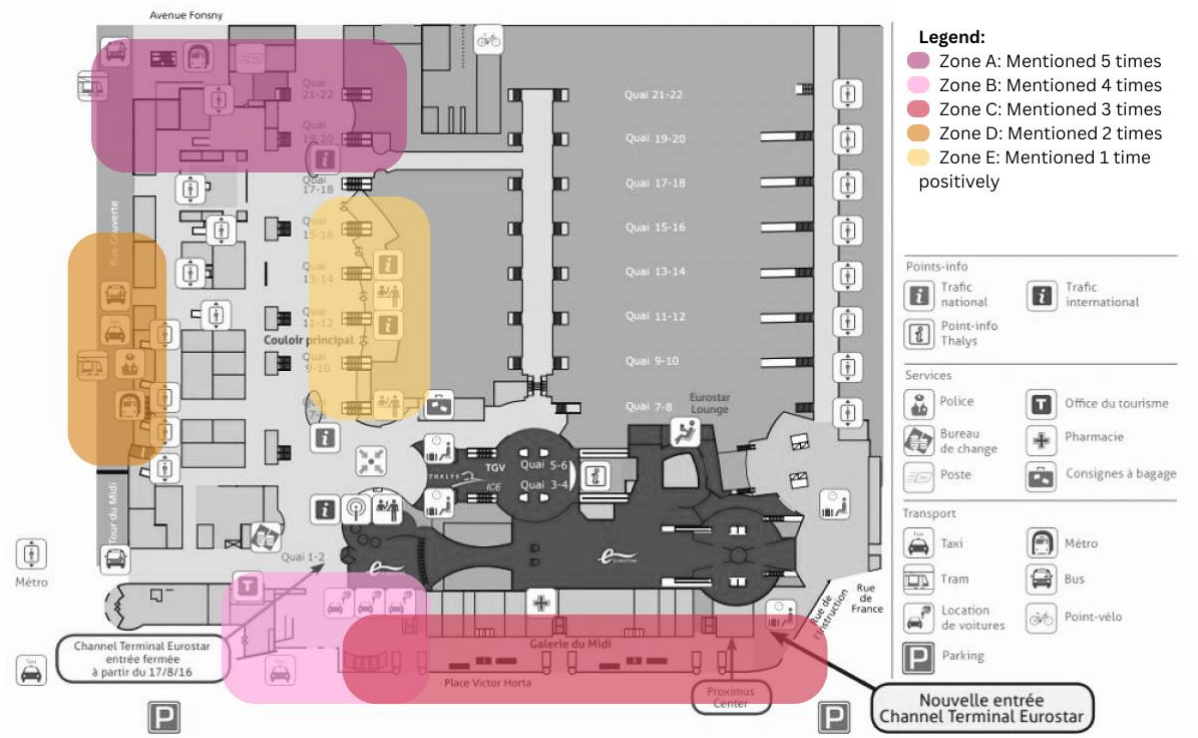


Figure 20 Danger zones and safe zones as reported by survey respondents (created by author)

Based on the further discussions with the respondents, several remarks regarding the station were made. Five of the respondents mentioned the button that calls security when pressed, that respondent 7 had described in his interview. Similarly, they also described that it has a limited effect on thieves, they are able to flee in the time it takes for security to reach their location. All but respondents 8 and 9 described theft or theft attempts they had witnessed, with respondent 15 describing further incidents such as vandalism of her shop and urination on her products, leading the station authorities to provide further reinforcements for the walls of her shop.

Respondent 15 further described that on at least one occasion, someone used her shop to hide from security or police. She witnessed the overall ups and downs of the station over three decades of her working there, including the addition, removal, and finally the recent reimplementation of the police station. According to her, the homeless and undocumented people who spent time around the station in the past were much nicer and sometimes even clients when compared to recent years. Her regular customers who live in the area tell her about incidents, such as people sitting and drinking

on their doorsteps. When asked about *familiar strangers*, the reaction mirrored the sentiment of most other people I talked to: “Regulars? The ones attacking us?”.

Respondent 15, echoing respondents 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14, describes the police station as having little to no effect on the daily life in the station. Respondents 11 and 12 in particular cited that the police only take note of incidents and do not follow up. According to respondent 15, the police station is for reports and administrative purposes rather than any further action.

Overall, this survey has mirrored the findings from research phases 1 and 2. The men interviewed were less concerned about safety in the station. The majority of the respondents did not feel that the police station impacted their feelings of security. Further, many also did not see the police being successful at providing long-lasting change. Lastly, the first association with the term *familiar strangers* was a negative one with many respondents referring to known thieves and troublemakers.

5. Discussion

The three research phases carried out for this thesis brought several issues to light. The emerging patterns found within the analysis of the interviews are visualised on the right-hand side Figure 21 below.

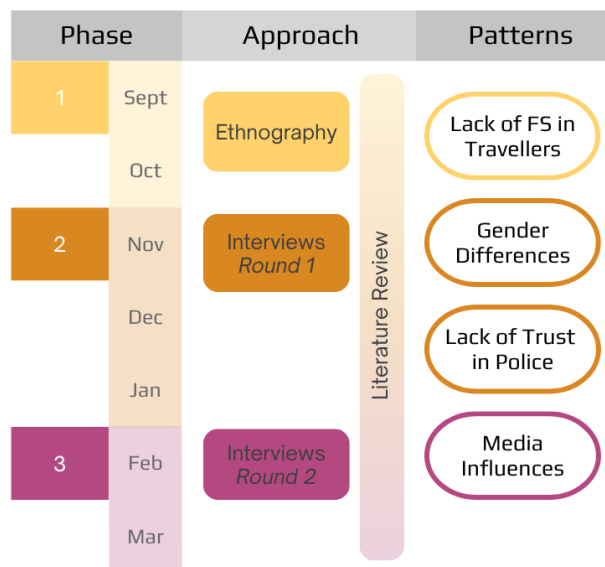


Figure 21 Recognised patterns within grounded theory approach (created by author)

Firstly, the characteristics of the South Station heavily impact the chances of people establishing a *familiar stranger* relationship and the type of relationship one might establish, namely, not being able to recognise people or only recognising people who stand out in a negative way. Secondly, there is a significant difference in the gender dimension of feelings of security in and around the station. The female respondents expressed higher levels of fear than the male respondents and explained that they take precautions, as opposed to the majority of the male respondents. Thirdly, there is scepticism when it comes to trust in and impact of the police in the South Station. Several respondents felt that there was no effect from the increased presence of police in the station building. Lastly, the media exacerbates the negative image of the station district. Most of the respondents explained to have heard about the negative news stories which informed their own perception of the South Station.

5.1 Familiar strangers in the station

Most respondents could not think of a *familiar stranger* as first described by Stanley Milgram that they might have in the vicinity of the Brussels South Station (Milgram & Blass, 2010). This fact can be attributed to the highly dynamic character of the station. The Brussels South Station had over 350.000 weekly visitors passing through the station in 2023, with an average of about 58.000 visitors on a weekday and about 33.000 on a weekend (Walker, 2024a). This high volume of passengers in itself already diminishes the chances of being able to recognise specific fellow passengers. It can also be assumed that the majority of these visitors do not frequent the station on a regular basis - taking trains to national or international destinations occasionally, also decreasing the chances of recognition of fellow visitors. This goes hand in hand with the rising popularity and use of remote work or work from home, which leads to less commuting, as explained by respondent 5, who only needs to be physically present in his office on certain occasions. This is a problem discussed by several authors who point out the fact that two people using the same mode of transport within an overlapping timeframe does not provide grounds for assuming they have a *familiar stranger* relationship (M. Zhang et al., 2022). At least one of them has to remember and recognise the other at a later point in time. Finding a few accounts of *familiar strangers* within Brussels South Station travellers can foremost be attributed to the size of and the number of people in the station, but other contributing factors come to mind. When approaching people, many were using their phones and headphones and seemed to pay little attention to their surroundings. Less attentive station users make for less likely *familiar strangers*. The motivation of this type of behaviour is unclear. It could simply be a means to pass the time and endure boredom. However, it could also be an intentional fencing off of one's surrounding so as to avoid any participation in encounters, good or bad, with the people around oneself. If one thinks about the conditions previous studies were conducted in, first by Milgram in 1972 and later Paulos and Goodman in 2004, this shift of attention from one's immediate surroundings and fellow travellers to the online world at one's fingertips begs the question of the applicability of the concept in our day and age (Milgram and Blass, 2010; Paulos and Goodman, 2004). Can the concept *familiar stranger* exist today as it did in 1972 or 2004?

In addition to the transit aspect of stations, station districts have criminogenic effects and tend to reinforce certain criminal behaviour (Lukas and Coomann, 2021; Üblacker and Lukas, 2019). It is thus not surprising that in the cases that respondents did have *familiar stranger* encounters, the relationship was a negative one. The respondents who felt they encountered and could identify

familiar strangers in their daily work reported mostly negative experiences. The dynamic character of the station offers perpetrators the coverage for petty crimes like theft, as discussed by Zahnow (2023). This explains how the areas of the South Station with the most transit, meaning the highest number of people passing by at a given moment, are perceived as particularly unsafe. The entries and exits of the station building offer not only cover but also more potential victims passing by with luggage. This creates the unsafe zones within the South Station identified by the survey respondents. They stand in contrast to the waiting area, within view of shops and other people spending an extended period, who could be potential witnesses, which is a classic perception of ‘eyes on the street’ or other passengers functioning as informal guardians (Jacobs, 1962; M. Zhang et al., 2022).

It could be argued that the interactions with thieves and vandals are not actually *familiar stranger* relationships as they were first described by Milgram (Milgram & Blass, 2010). While these people were repeatedly observed, they had interacted with the respondents by stealing from their shops. Further it breaks the *familiar stranger* relationship wherein “both parties have agreed to mutually ignore each other, without any implication of hostility.” (Milgram & Blass, 2010, p.62). Therefore, with these interpretations there would be no *familiar stranger* relationship beyond the occasional face some respondents claimed to remember. This fits the term of acquaintanceship that describes these types of weaker tie relationships (Sprecher, 2022). This finding could be the basis for a redefinition of the *familiar stranger* in future research — potentially into an acquaintance category, such as a “familiar antagonist”. A small interaction, positive or negative, could leave a long-lasting impression in someone’s mind, similar to that of the socio-metric stars described by Milgram (Milgram & Blass, 2010).

5.2 Gender differences in the expression of fear

Another recurring pattern was the difference in reporting of the feelings of security between the male and female respondents. As expected from previous findings in the literature (Enhuss, 2023; Gilow, 2016; Johansson and Haandrikman, 2023), the female respondents were overall more fearful than their male counterparts. While only some of the women had experienced dangerous situations themselves, such as respondent 6 and respondent 15, all of them mentioned feeling unsafe and taking precautions. Some of them, like respondent 6, drew from the experience of other women they knew. Others seemed to simply be on high alert in general, which reflects the gendered perception

of danger found in previous academic research. One could argue the these women display a form of negativity bias, interpreting any future encounters as inherently more negative based on their general view of the station and its safety (Schafer et al., 2003; Skogan, 2006). These experiences by female respondents could be reinforced by environmental factors present in the South Station, such as poor lighting and other people's behaviour as discussed by Sundling and Ceccato (2022). This then explains women's heightened vigilance and avoidant and protective behaviours to the perceived danger posed by the South Station. This could also be emphasised through the interplay of the majority of the homeless and intoxicated people that are perceived as a threat in the station being men, as observed in the field. This creates an intimidating environment for the large share of female retail workers in the station, even in cases where they do not actually experience incidents related to these people.

5.3 Policing impacts

It has been found in previous studies that increased policing in the form of patrolling can reduce certain types of crime (Novak et al., 2016; Weisburd et al., 2024). Based on the findings of Novak et al., one might expect the increased police presence at Brussels South Station to have a similar effect; however, the amount and types of incidents have not changed according to the reports by the interviewees. Their reception of the police station was partially hopeful but mainly indifferent. The respondents did not feel like police presence made an impact on the issues they are facing, namely theft in the shops and incidents of violence and public nuisance in and around the area. This is, of course, simply the perception of the numbers of crime by the users and does not necessarily reflect the actual number of incidents. It is well established that decreasing crime rates do not necessarily reflect in decreasing fear amongst the population (Esberg and Mummolo, 2018; F. Zhang et al., 2021). At this point in time there are no crime statistics comparing the number of crimes before and after the opening of the police station in the South Station available. Nor any statistics on the potential displacement of crime, resulting from the increased policing efforts in the South Station.

Even without crime statistics, one could argue about the effect of policing. If security and the police, as reported by the respondents, take a long time to react to calls of distress, then they do not impact the value, inertia, visibility, and access (VIVA) of potential targets of crime (Miró, 2014). The most reported crimes, the stealing of products from the various retail shops in the station's main hall,

require a perpetrator to check their immediate surroundings for any security or police staff. Once they have grabbed something to steal, they can quickly leave the building with little issue. While a physical altercation does not fit these requirements, the issues reported by respondents were intoxicated people behaving in loud and aggressive ways. These are more public nuisance issues rather than planned crimes. Police presence does, in this case, not counterbalance the criminogenic effects of the dynamic nature of train stations and large crowds as discussed by Zahnow (2023).

This, however, does not negate the impact on the users' perception and, in turn, raises the question about the aim of the newly established police station in the building of the South Station and if it can have any long-term effects. According to Novak et al. (2016), the reducing effects of crime do not last beyond the time period during which increased patrolling is being carried out. Likewise, a police intervention that is perceived as inefficient and insufficient is likely to lead to a more negative perception of policing in the station as a whole as laid out by Schafer et al. (2003), explaining the resignation of the respondents that did hold a favourable view of the police station in Brussels South Station. There still was a part of the respondents that wished for higher police and security presence in the station building which can be linked to the idea that visibility of the police increases the trust by the local community in policing services (Hawdon et al., 2003). Further, it has been expressed by some respondents (respondents 5 and 7) that they perceive the decision to 'tackle crime' around Brussels South Station as of a performative nature. Respondents 15 even linked it to the recent elections in Brussels and deemed it a political move to gain the favour of voters in the area.

While an interview with experienced social workers in the station district could not be conducted, there is reason to believe that there are alternatives that could achieve more long-lasting change. These include initiatives targeting the root issues, such as a drug consumption rooms or supervised injecting facilities (Dow-Fleisner et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2021), increasing the number of social workers in the area, housing initiative, and access to government welfare amenities such as healthcare and counselling (Munthe-Kaas et al., 2018; Wireman, 2007; Zufferey and Kerr, 2004).

5.4 Media reporting and image

The media analysis, as well as the opinions on the media reporting by respondents 5 and 7, provides the basis for a discussion about how the media apparatus creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. As described by Schwarze, (2022), negative media reporting informs people's image of an area and reinforces stereotypes and biases. Hipp (2013) found that violent crime especially drives negative perception of crime. As the media analysis showed, over half of the media headlines with the South Station in their headlines covered the general disarray of the South Station or violent incidents. For the headlines about the violent incidents in particular, there seem to be multiple articles about the incident itself, as well as the victims and the perpetrator. Hence, it can be argued that revisiting a case like a stabbing or a shooting several times without any new information will just reinforce the narrative about the danger surrounding Brussels South Station.

While this study does not provide proof for a causation of increased feelings of insecurity through media reporting, several respondents were part of a general opinion that the South Station 'just is' unsafe and dangerous, despite not having experienced or witnessed any incidents themselves. This can be linked to the misperception of crime, as argued by Esberg and Mummolo (2018), who found that exposure to non-factual information heavily influenced people's view on crime in their area, linking back to the idea of territorial stigmatisation.

This can also be seen in the sentiments towards homeless people who were cited as a source of unease. One could argue that this othering of the homeless population in Brussels South Station, is a highly politicised issue at this point. As respondent 15 recalled, the station had gotten more attention from the municipal government in the lead-up to the most recent elections. Brussels South Station is used as an image of the success or failure of the municipal government, by media and opposition alike. This is the instrumentalization of fear on both a societal and political level as laid out by Enhus (2023). However, the lengthy journey to sustainable improvement of the area does not yield fast results. This means that performative action, like a 'clean-up' of homeless people or the opening of a police station are much preferred to expensive and time-consuming interventions.

It has to be noted that these sentiments only represent the feelings of the interviewees who were predominantly white and working within the station. The potential intimidation of othered groups, such as the homeless population or people of colour, by the police can only be theorised but seems likely, given the history of recent incidents involving the Brussels police, which is in line with previous

findings of academic studies (Newburn and Reiner, 2007; Warren and Tomaskovic-Devey, 2009). This racial or class bias is also likely to be present among users of the South Station, who adapt their behaviour based on these biases while in the station district. In that sense, the users of Brussels South Station adhere to situational crime prevention in mitigating the danger they feel and not worrying about the issues at the root of these dangers (Sundling and Ceccato, 2022; Wortley, 2010). It seems logical that on an individual level, a person focuses only on immediate danger and not on the bigger picture. However, this stigmatisation of station districts requires intervention with long-lasting impacts from municipal governments in order to prevent further decline and downward spirals as described in the literature (Lukas and Coomann, 2021; Üblacker and Lukas, 2019).

5.5 Wider discussion

Overall, the grounded theory approach applied in this thesis allowed for tackling certain expected limitation. The low response rates could be increased by first changing the focus to different user groups and then evolving the simple interview into a survey with a map. The latter was much better received as it gave respondents a visual starting point from which they could branch out and report their experiences. Once people had started talking, they were much more receptive to the probing questions prepared in research phase 1. The non-existence of familiar strangers or the limited existence as negative impressions is a valuable insight, as the previous qualitative literature focused on the existence of *familiar strangers* and not their perception (Milgram and Blass, 2010; Paulos and Goodman, 2004), while the quantitative studies have focused on the impact of crime happening in train stations (Zahnow et al., 2023; M. Zhang et al., 2022). Neither have studied the perception, good or bad, of *familiar strangers* and the existence of either gives insights to their relationship to perceived security in train stations.

5.6 Reflections on limitations

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the methodology applied in this research. This thesis had some constraints first in time, and then in respondent rates. The application of grounded theory in this case allowed for an adaptation of the methods to the case at hand, but also led to limited time for the optimised data collection. This short period of data collection, paired with a low response rate, led to a limited number of interviews being carried out.

The majority of the main stakeholders of organisations present in the South Station were either unresponsive or not willing to participate in this research when contacted. The grounded theory approach applied allowed to shift the research scope and adjust the methodology to help answer the research questions. Based on this experience, future research could focus on generating a larger respondent rate by directly using a survey, potentially online, with questions on type of user, feelings of safety, and the recognition of strangers in the station. Additionally, an early contact with stakeholders more willing to participate, such as social workers or the train police, could yield more data from diverse perspectives. It could also be helpful to define a narrower research focus and just work with a specific user group, such as commuters, and work with a different qualitative method such as a ride along interview or focus groups. In light of the large number of passengers passing Brussels South Station each day, one could also study a smaller station as a case study, for example a station in commuting distance of Brussels with higher chances of people recognising each other.

The analysis of the experiences reported in different forms by 15 respondents does not claim to be complete nor to cover all types of stakeholders as the thesis originally intended. The group of respondents was diverse in age and gender, but lacked diversity in race and user group. This homogeneity leads to one-sided reports, such as the threats respondents felt from homeless people, but not the fear that homeless people might have against other groups.

Additionally, an unexpected difficulty was approaching minorities, such as the homeless population residing in the vicinity of the station and its surroundings, or people of colour. For the former, some of them were clearly intoxicated and unable to participate in a study, and in cases they were sleeping by the tram stop of the South Station under the bridge, I did not want to wake them up. Concerning the latter, I had some mixed reactions from Black people I approached who did not seem to like being approached for a study on security. I got the impression that they felt like they were under suspicion

of making the station unsafe. While I clearly stated that I was interested in their opinion, I decided not to bother and make any more users uncomfortable, which led to me avoiding certain groups.

Furthermore, the topic at hand was new to many of the participants and while many of them think about their safety in the South Station frequently, none of them had heard of the concept of familiar strangers before. The introduction to the concept was cause for thought for the majority of the respondents. The probing questions were designed to be as open as possible, but there is a risk of skewing people's train of thought. The interview itself presented a learning opportunity and the first moment of reflection as laid out by Coppola and Silvestri (2020).

5.7 Reflections on positionality

Throughout the research process, my awareness around the Brussels South Station and its problems grew. Before my fieldwork, I, like many others, used my headphones and phone to pass the time in the waiting hall, often paying little attention to my surroundings. With my growing awareness, I subconsciously steered away from the idea of spending prolonged times late at night there out of fear of danger. In this response, I showed the exact same behaviour as the interview respondents. Moreover, I found it difficult to approach people, especially those wearing headphones or in groups.

While carrying out the research, speaking multiple languages fluently was the main factor in getting positive responses. The majority of people approached spoke French, while those who did not spoke English, both of which I speak fluently. Being able to offer my limited Dutch or native German allowed me to show my flexibility to respondents. Further, my previous experience with carrying out fieldwork and interviews helped me in approaching both stakeholders from the station district and users of Brussels South Station.

The majority of the respondents reacted positively to my explanation of carrying out research for my master's thesis, being interested in what I had heard from other respondents, and wishing me luck with my thesis. However, in certain cases like the contact with bigger organisations, such as the Police Local Midi and Securitas, the research was more off-putting to them, and they explained they could not share any insights with me.

5.8 Recommendations

This thesis has provided significant insights into the relevance of familiar strangers for security concerns of users of train stations. Train stations are locations with a criminogenic effect and are in need of improved security measures for passengers and workers. The importance of crowds or strangers, familiar or not, within the context of crime in train stations has been recognised (Zahnow, 2023; Zahnow et al., 2021, 2023). However the aspect of the perceived security adds to these insights by understanding if the familiar stranger provides an opportunity to increase customer feelings of safety and thus satisfaction with their experience at train stations.

Drawing from the qualitative research by Milgram in 1972 and later Paulos and Goodman in 2004 as well as the more recent quantitative research by M. Zhang et al. (2022), Zahnow (2023), Zahnow et al. (2021, 2023), and Zhou et al. (2020), it was found to be of interest to redefine the term *familiar stranger* to fit the context of the research. This was done by Zahnow (2023), who applied the term ‘regular riders’. In the case at hand, one could deviate from the original definition by widening the concept of familiarity from just sight to brief interactions, as was the case for several of the retail workers in Brussels South Station in this research. This is especially worthwhile if one goes beyond the original experiment by Milgram of studying commuters (Milgram and Blass, 2010). One could also delve deeper into related fields of criminology and crime prevention. One example is a potential link to routine activity theory, as one could examine the potential heightened risk of becoming a target of a crime if one’s activities or presence at a certain location is predictable. Another possibility is to combine the familiarity of passengers with other people with the familiarity of places and how these interact with one another.

6. Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore the role of *familiar strangers* in shaping feelings of security at Brussels South Station, an urban transport hub marked by spatial complexity, socioeconomic precarity, and symbolic stigma. In doing so, it sought to contribute to an underexplored intersection of urban criminology and environmental psychology, bridging research on the perception of safety, the sociology of place, and the tacit social relationships that unfold in transient public settings.

The applied methodology of an iterative process through grounded theory allowed continuous data collection and analysis. The qualitative mix of field ethnographic research and different types of semi-structured interviews, adjusted based on previous outcomes and experiences in the field, allowed to capture the highly individual experiences and perceptions of travellers, workers, and commuters in the South Station.

The findings of this exploratory study underscore that familiar strangers occupy an ambiguous but also potent role in how individuals perceive and navigate public space. While previous quantitative studies have hinted at the protective or regulatory function of routine encounters in public transport systems, this thesis highlights how these dynamics are subjectively experienced contextually constructed by daily users of Brussels South Station.

The main research question formulated was *What role do familiar strangers and recurring individuals play in the perceived security of Brussels South Station's daily users?* The results of this thesis showed that most respondents do not think about the existence of *familiar strangers* at all. This reflected in their perception of the security at Brussels South Station. While a majority of the respondents do have security concerns, some of those working at the station facing them on a daily basis, they mainly link it to their fear of incidents. The most common individuals pointed out as *familiar strangers* did not fit the definition in the strict sense, as they were regular thieves at respondents' workplaces. This goes against the 'no interaction' part of the definition first introduced by Milgram (Milgram and Blass, 2010). As these cases were negative experiences, they impacted the perceived security of the respondents negatively. The individuals recognised as *familiar strangers* according to the entire definition such as other people working in the retail area of the station or the security staff, that the respondents had not interacted with, did not have an impact on the respondents' perception of security at Brussels South Station. In some cases this has to do with the

general attitude of indifference towards police and security as the regular users of the South Station do not deem them to have an impact on the amount of crimes committed in the station.

The first set of sub questions covering familiar strangers were *How do users of Brussels South Station define and recognize familiar strangers in their daily routines?* and *Which user groups encounter familiar strangers on a regular basis?* For the latter, it became clear throughout the research process that certain user groups, such as travellers and commuters, did not report any *familiar stranger* relationships as they either travel infrequently or irregularly and do not recognise people on the platforms or trains they are taking. Those users who did report *familiar strangers* in a wider sense, mostly the workers in the retail area of the main waiting hall in Brussels South Station, recalled either regular clients or regular thieves, and less often other workers in the station. While they are not *familiar strangers* strictly academically speaking, they are people who they recognise based on repeated impersonal interaction but who they do not have a formal relationship with.

The second set of sub questions about the general sense of safety were formulated as such: *What factors contribute to a sense of security or insecurity among regular users of Brussels South Station?* and *What areas of the station are deemed particularly safe or unsafe by users of Brussels South Station?* The factors cited as contributing to regular users' sense of insecurity differed per gender as the female respondents reported a higher fear of crime and feeling of insecurity. They mentioned the time of day as major factors, such as arriving early for a morning shift to an emptier station building or having to wait for public transport late at night. One female survey interviewee, respondent 10, even explained she does not feel safe at all in any part of the station. Both women and men listed intoxicated and homeless people as main reasons they felt uneasy or unsafe, evoking the fear of a violent incident. This was regardless of whether they had witnessed incidents or fell victim to a crime themselves. Further, some people explained they would welcome increased security and policing in the station while others deemed that ineffective. In the same spirit, some people wished for closer monitoring of the homeless population with others understanding that municipal politicians and governments should rather tackle the root issues of homelessness and drug addiction. Concerning the second sub question, all but one respondent stated that they did not have any areas they would consider safe in the Brussels South Station. The unsafe zones concentrated in the entry and exit areas of the station, as well as the area close to the public restrooms.

While the research faced limitations in access, sample size, and institutional response, especially from security actors, it nonetheless surfaces a compelling agenda for future study. Expanding this

qualitative inquiry to other station environments, integrating mixed methods, or linking it to debates on inclusive urban design and relational safety could greatly enrich both academic insight and policy relevance.

This thesis reframes urban safety as not simply a function of crime control or infrastructure, but as a lived, relational phenomenon, one in which even the quiet presence of a familiar stranger can tip the balance between vigilance and ease. In doing so, it opens up new conceptual and empirical pathways for understanding how we are held together, or left behind, in the everyday choreography of city life.

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Appendix

Appendix A - Interview guides

A1 - Stakeholders

Table 4 Interview guide stakeholders

Section	Topic	Question/Statement
Introduction	Explanation of research	<i>I am conducting research for my master thesis at ULB and VUB. My research focuses on feelings of security in and around Brussels' South Station. For my research, I mainly spend time in the station and talk to people using the station.</i> <i>All data will only be handled by me and stored securely and might only be shared with my thesis supervisor. All answers will be pseudonymised before publishing. If you decide at any point that you no longer wish to participate in my research, you can revoke your consent and all recorded data will be destroyed.</i>
	Consent form/ recorded consent (?)	<i>Do you agree to participate in this study? Do you consent to being recorded?</i> <i>Any more questions before we start?</i>
Main	Relation to Brussels South	<i>Could you briefly introduce yourself?</i> <i>What is your relation to Brussels South Station?</i> <i>How often do you come here?</i>
	Feelings of security	<i>How safe do you feel at Midi Station? Why?</i> <i>When do you feel particularly safe?</i>
	Incidents	<i>Has anything ever happened that made you feel particularly unsafe?</i> <i>If you feel comfortable sharing: what happened?</i> <i>What would have helped make you feel safer?</i>
	Familiar strangers	<i>Do you feel safer when people are around?</i>

		<i>Are there people you see on a regular basis here? Do they make you feel safer?</i>
Outro/Final	Comments	<i>Is there anything else you would like to share?</i>
	Questions	<i>Do you have any questions for me?</i>

A2 - Mobile users

Table 5 Interview guide mobile users

Section	Topic	Question/Statement	
Introduction	Explanation of research	<i>I am conducting research for my master thesis at ULB and VUB. My research focuses on feelings of security in and around Brussels' South Station. For my research, I mainly spend time in the station and talk to people using the station.</i> <i>All data will only be handled by me and stored securely and might only be shared with my thesis supervisor. All answers will be pseudonymised before publishing. If you decide at any point that you no longer wish to participate in my research, you can revoke your consent and all recorded data will be destroyed.</i>	<i>Je mène des recherches dans le cadre de mon mémoire de master à l'ULB et à la VUB. Ma recherche porte sur le sentiment de sécurité dans et autour de la gare du Midi à Bruxelles. Pour ma recherche, je passe principalement du temps dans la gare et je parle aux personnes qui l'utilisent.</i> <i>Toutes les données ne seront traitées que par moi, stockées en toute sécurité et ne seront éventuellement communiquées qu'à mon directeur de thèse. Toutes les réponses seront pseudonymisées avant d'être publiées. Si vous décidez à un moment donné de ne plus participer à mes recherches, vous pouvez révoquer votre consentement et toutes les données enregistrées seront détruites.</i>
	Consent form/	<i>Do you agree to participate in this study? Do you consent to being recorded?</i>	<i>Acceptez-vous de participer à cette étude? Acceptez-vous d'être enregistré?</i>

	recorded consent	<i>Any more questions before we start?</i>	<i>Avez-vous d'autres questions avant de commencer?</i>
Main	Relation to Brussels South	<i>Could you briefly introduce yourself?</i> <i>What is your relation to Brussels South Station?</i> <i>How often do you come here?</i>	<i>Pouvez-vous vous présenter brièvement?</i> <i>Quel est votre lien avec la gare de Bruxelles-Midi?</i> <i>Combien de fois venez-vous ici?</i>
	Feelings of security	<i>How safe do you feel at Midi Station? Why?</i> <i>When do you feel particularly safe? UNSAFE?</i>	<i>Dans quelle mesure vous sentez-vous en sécurité à la gare du Midi? Pourquoi?</i> <i>Quand vous sentez-vous particulièrement en sécurité? EN DANGER?</i>
	Incidents	<i>Has anything ever happened that made you feel particularly unsafe?</i> <i>If you feel comfortable sharing: what happened?</i> <i>What would have helped make you feel safer?</i>	<i>Vous est-il arrivé de vous sentir particulièrement en danger?</i> <i>Si vous vous sentez à l'aise pour le dire : que s'est-il passé?</i> <i>Qu'est-ce qui vous aurait aidé à vous sentir plus en sécurité?</i>
	Familiar strangers	<i>Do you feel safer when people are around?</i> <i>(What people make you feel safer?)</i> <i>Have you ever heard of familiar strangers? [explain the concept if necessary] Do you have some? Do they make you feel safer?</i>	<i>Vous sentez-vous plus en sécurité quand il y a des gens autour de vous?</i> <i>(Quelles sont les personnes qui vous font vous sentir plus en sécurité?)</i> <i>Avez-vous déjà entendu parler d'étrangers familiers? (Expliquer le concept si nécessaire) En avez-vous? Vous sentent-ils plus en sécurité?</i>
If applicable	Walk-along	<i>Does the presence of security make you feel more safe? Why (not)?</i>	<i>La présence de la sécurité vous fait-elle sentir plus en sécurité? Pourquoi (pas)?</i>

Outro/Final	Comments	<i>Is there anything else you would like to share?</i>	<i>Y a-t-il autre chose que vous aimeriez partager?</i>
	Questions	<i>Do you have any questions for me?</i>	<i>Avez-vous des questions à me poser?</i>

Appendix B - Overview respondents

B1 - Respondents research phase 1

Table 6 Overview of in respondents in research phase 1

Respondent	Type of Interview	User group	Interviewee	Language	Status
1	Informal talk	Traveler, regular visitor	Elderly woman	English	Conducted in October 2024
2	Informal talk	Traveler, rare visitor	Young, mother	French	Conducted in October 2024
3	Informal talk	Traveler, rare visitor	Middle aged man	English	Conducted in October 2024
4	Informal talk	Traveler, rare visitor	Man in 30s	English	Conducted in October 2024

B2 - Respondents research phase 2

Table 7 Overview of respondents in research phase 2

Respondent	Type of Interview	User group	Interviewee	Status
5	Semi structured interview	Commuter, regular user	30s, male	Conducted and recorded in December 2024

6	Explorative interview	Retail worker in station	20s, female	Conducted in February 2025
7	Semi structured interview	Retail worker in station	20s, male	Planned for February, conducted and recorded in March 2025
-	Semi structured interview	HoReCa worker at station	30s, male	Planned for February then pushed back, not replied since March 2025

B3 - Respondents research phase 3

Table 8 Overview of respondents in research phase 3

Respondent	Type of Interview	User group	Interviewee	Status
8	Survey interview	Retail worker	28, male	Conducted in March 2025
9	Survey interview	Retail worker	23, male	Conducted in March 2025
10	Survey interview	Retail worker	34, female	Conducted in March 2025
11	Survey interview	Retail worker	45, female	Conducted in March 2025
12	Survey interview	Retail worker	42, male	Conducted in March 2025
13/14	Survey interview	Workers in HoReCa	35&38, female	Conducted in March 2025
15	Survey interview	Retail worker and business owner	59, female	Conducted in March 2025

Appendix C - Overview Quotes

Table 9 List of used quotes with translations

Location	Respondent	Quote English	Quote original (if applicable)
p.44	2	"There are a lot of homeless people."	"Il y a beaucoup de clochards."
p.45	4	"I am not in the station often enough to give an accurate opinion."	-
p.49	5	"And generally, I was genuinely quite scared of this place. And even when I moved to Brussels, I, like at the beginning, I was... especially in like, late hours, I was preparing bike routes home that don't go to the area, some of the alternatives. Yeah, the more I think, it looks and feels a bit worse than it actually is."	-
p.49	5	"In the evening, it's just kind of like, it feels very sketchy, just like, you know, like very... there's some sketchy people walking around. Probably also some people who are perfectly fine, but it's just like, in this environment, you're a bit suspicious of everyone and everything."	-
p.50	5	"And yeah, I guess, like, have more people that are intoxicated in one way or the other, and then you can never be sure how people could act potentially. It's not like they would necessarily - like most of them wouldn't, but it's just there is this bit of a feeling like, maybe someone will, like, click on the	-

		wrong side and, yeah, if I'm standing alone somewhere, and, you know, waiting around, yeah, okay, feel a bit like looking around instead of trying to like chill."	
p.50	5	"Of course, it may be helping in some regards, when you read about, like, high crime statistics around the station and so on. But quite often, I just kind of assume that it's well, either like some agenda behind that, or just kind of lazy sensation seeking journalism. I mean, there's, there has been this talk about, like, cleaning up the station, but also, there have been like, just plain incidents, like the stabbing, shooting, the other stabbing. So, I feel like those I have heard getting like, brought up. I guess those are the sites where media would exacerbate some people's security. But also, I think it's like, especially before I had, like, lots of my own personal experience, it's also just like little evidence of people [...] and how they feel about the place that most of them would not have great things to say. Lots of them, like, actively avoid the area or station."	-
p.51	5	"plaster over the problem rather than resolving it"	-
p.51	5	"Like, quite often it would be that there is a homeless person sitting inside the building and they will, like, just expel them outside. That's like... Maybe it improves the feeling of security for me on some levels. But, if it comes at this cost of it, like this is not really helping anything."	-

p.52	6	“Ah, it’s scary in the evening.”	“Ah, le soir ça fait peur.”
p.52	6	“thieves we know by face”	“des voleurs qu’on connaît par visage”
p.52	7	“Never any problems, but I still feel that there's an atmosphere that's very, very, very difficult. You still have to be careful with your belongings, you still have to look to the right, to the left. So, I would say, I would say, we still don't feel safe.”	“Jamais de problèmes donc, mais pour autant, je sens qu'il y a une atmosphère qui est quand même très, très, très difficile. Il faut faire attention quand même à ses affaires, il faut regarder à droite, à gauche quand même. Donc, je dirais, je dirais, on ne se sent pas en sécurité quand même.”
p.52	7	“So, we say to ourselves that there are witnesses.”	“Donc on se dit qu'il y a des témoins.”
p.53	7	“Afterwards, there are faces that we sometimes recognize, I know that when I go to [the restaurant] or [the restaurant] I pretty much recognize the faces. So, there you go. And then when we say I work in the station, we generally get a discount, it's not variable 5 or 10 percent, right away. It also creates a feeling of connection. Let's say. Because we live, we live the same daily life more or less, we work in the station.”	“Après, il y a des têtes parfois qu'on reconnaît, moi je sais que quand je vais au [restaurant] ou au [restaurant] je reconnais à peu près les têtes. Donc voilà. Et puis quand on dit je travaille dans la gare, on a une réduction en général, ce n'est pas variable 5 ou 10 pourcent, tout de suite. Ça crée aussi une sensation de rapprochement. On va dire. Parce qu'on vit, on vit le même quotidien plus ou moins, on travaille dans la gare.”
p.53	7	“And even if these people start again the next day, all those who smoke crack, for example, will. That's it, that's it, that, unfortunately, there is a situation where, legally, even the police can't do anything with all these people. So, there you go. I know there are limits to what can be done.”	“Et quand bien même ces personnes vont recommencer le lendemain, tous ceux qui fument du crack, par exemple, vont. C'est ça, c'est que, malheureusement, il y a une situation où légalement même la police en fait ne peut rien faire avec tout avec tous ces gens là. Donc voilà. Je sais qu'il y a des limites à ce qui peut être fait.”

p.57	13/14	“Our favourite number is the security’s	“Notre numéro préféré, c’est la sécurité”
p.59	15	“Regulars? The ones attacking us?”	“Habituels? Qui nous agressent?”