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‘To Feel at Home Is to Feel Safe’: Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (Re)Creating a Sense of Home in Foster Care over Time

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Abstract: This study explores what unaccompanied refugee minors (URMs) emphasise as important to (re)create a sense of home in foster care over time. Through a longitudinal design consisting of semi-structured, photo-elicitation interviews and by drawing on the concept of *homing*, we clustered young people’s experiences into three intertwined aspects that contribute to (re)creating a sense of home in foster care: security, familiarity, and autonomy. The study highlights the importance of the emotional, relational, and material resources that young people may access through familial relationships (in foster care), which seem to be an essential part of (re)creating a sense of home. Our findings unpack how URMs in foster care are active agents in *doing* and *becoming* home—not just *being* at home—highlighting their participation and continuous navigation of belonging in daily life. Moreover, our analysis indicates that URMs (re)creating a sense of home in foster care is a dynamic and temporal process between their past experiences, present circumstances, and future aspirations. It is essential for child welfare workers and foster parents to be aware of and support URMs’ connections to their heritage background, birth families, and foster parents during transitions, as well as their individual needs. Findings from this study nuance existing research on what contributes to a supportive foster care environment for URMs, specifically how foster parents can facilitate URMs’ sense of home over time. Yet, our findings also highlight the need for further research on how to better support continuity in foster care for URMs, particularly regarding the role and meaning of cultural, religious, and linguistic belonging.

Keywords: belonging; foster care; homing; temporality; unaccompanied refugee minors



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1. Introduction

I have lived in many different places [. . .] Here (in foster care), I feel like I am at home. It is the only place I have felt at home since moving to Norway [. . .] Of all the places, none felt like home. Not that feeling. Here, it feels like home.

This is a reflection from a young person who moved into foster care after arriving in Norway as an unaccompanied refugee minor (URM). By definition, URMs have been forced to flee from their birth countries due to a “well-founded fear of being persecuted”. (UNHCR 1994, p. 4). Furthermore, being ‘unaccompanied’ means they fled and/or arrived in the host country without any caregivers, in addition to being ‘minors’—children under

the age of 18. This complex status renders them particularly vulnerable (UNHCR 1994, p. 71). As URM's move to a new country, it inevitably involves processes of emotional, relational, and material uprooting (Ahmed 1999; Sirriyeh 2016). With the phrasing from Ahmed (1999), it involves “a process of estrangement, a process of becoming estranged from that which was inhabited as home” (p. 343).

These experiences of insecurity and disruption pose risks in relation to their physical, intellectual, psychological, cultural, and social development (UNHCR 1994, p. 13). Additionally, these conditions can lead to exclusion and discrimination, challenging their sense of belonging (Kohli et al. 2010; Rip et al. 2020b; Wade et al. 2012). Research suggests that foster care can provide a supportive environment for URM's, and although international research is growing when it comes to protective factors, there is a need for in-depth studies on their everyday lived experiences and the complexities these entail over time (Rip et al. 2020b; Trenson et al. 2023; Van Holen et al. 2020). Against this background, it is crucial to conduct longitudinal studies that focus on the perspectives of URM's, specifically exploring their resources, practices, and agency in (re)creating a sense of home in foster care (Garvik et al. 2016; Svendsen et al. 2018; Wernesjö 2012). This study aims to address these gaps by asking: What do unaccompanied refugee minors in foster care emphasise as important to (re)create a sense of home over time?

Understanding what is important for URM's, including how *home* is felt and practised when living in foster care, can help inform policies and practices that are responsive to their needs and facilitate their wellbeing.

1.1. The Norwegian Context

From 1996 to 2022, 10,940 children were granted permanent residence permits in Norway as unaccompanied refugee minors (URM's), with 10,173 still residing at the beginning of 2023 (Kirkeberg and Lunde 2024)¹. They have an average age of 15.5 years at the time of resettlement in the municipalities. Eight out of ten are male, and they have mainly come from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Somalia, and Syria in recent years (Kirkeberg and Lunde 2024).

When a young person is granted a residence permit, the municipalities are responsible to organise and determine proper housing and care arrangements, whether solely under the child welfare service or in collaboration with the refugee service (IMDi 2024). Foster care is one of several housing arrangements for URM, but it is mainly used for those under 15, while the older ones usually live in residential care (Garvik et al. 2016; Svendsen et al. 2018). However, for URM's living in foster homes, foster parents with majority backgrounds are more common than kinship placements and foster parents with minority backgrounds due to the scarcity of both (Garvik et al. 2016).

According to the Norwegian Child Welfare Act, all youth have the right to aftercare measures until their 25th birthday (Child Welfare Act 2021, sct. 1–2), and URM's in Norway often receive aftercare (Svendsen et al. 2018). Under the Immigration Act, family reunification can be applied for by the birth parents of URM's with specific types of residence permits, along with their siblings who are younger than 18 (Immigration Act 2008, sct. 43). Many young people are above 18 before their birth family arrives, as the processing time for family reunification is long (Bergset et al. 2024). If they become reunified with their family, the young person must live with the birth family for five years, which means they will have to move out of their current housing, including foster care (Immigration Act 2008, sct. 62).

1.2. Review of Previous Research

Settling into a new family can be challenging for all children and youth in foster care (Bengtsson and Luckow 2020; Hedin 2014; Schofield 2002). Often, they have experienced

abuse, neglect, and disruptions (Gypen et al. 2017), and need to establish a sense of belonging in a new family environment in terms of class, family culture, and traditions (Boddy 2019; Phoenix 2016; Schofield 2002). Studies focusing on foster care for URMIs echo the broader foster care research regarding these experiences of significant changes and challenges. Yet, URMIs may experience other disruptions with (family) culture, language, religion, values, and norms (Luster et al. 2009; Ní Raghallaigh and Sirriyeh 2015; Sirriyeh 2013; Van Holen et al. 2020; Wade et al. 2012). Furthermore, they face unique difficulties shaped by political and social structures, such as their precarious legal statuses as ‘asylum-seeking’ or ‘refugees’, in addition to their position as ‘foster children’ (Crea et al. 2018; Kohli 2011; Kohli et al. 2010; Ní Raghallaigh 2013; Sirriyeh 2013). These conditions can lead to exclusion and discrimination, which challenge their sense of belonging in a new country or family (Mörge and Rieker 2022; Rip et al. 2020b; Wade et al. 2012). Consequently, they may feel like ‘guests’ or ‘strangers’ (Kauko and Forsberg 2018; Mörge and Rieker 2022; Sirriyeh 2013; Wernesjö 2015).

Additionally, URMIs’ traumatic experiences of having fled alone, being separated from their birth families due to war and conflict, and navigating family reunification processes also present unique challenges for this group of children and youth (Bergset et al. 2024; Crea et al. 2018; Luster et al. 2009; Mitra and Hodes 2019; Trenson et al. 2023). Social support over time emerges across the literature as a central factor for URMIs’ overall wellbeing and sense of home, whether from their birth families, foster parents, friends, or professionals like teachers or social workers (Börjesson and Söderqvist Forkby 2020; Kauko and Forsberg 2018; Mitra and Hodes 2019; Oppedal and Idsoe 2015; Tiilikainen et al. 2023; Trenson et al. 2023; Wernesjö 2015). Maintaining connections to their heritage culture is also crucial (Rana et al. 2011; Trenson et al. 2023; Van Holen et al. 2020), highlighting the importance of multiple belongings (Kauko and Wernesjö 2017; Pieloch et al. 2016; Trenson et al. 2023).

Several studies in Europe have found that foster care is associated with better mental health (Kalverboer et al. 2016; Mitra and Hodes 2019; Van Holen et al. 2020; Zijlstra et al. 2019) and educational outcomes among URMIs compared to less supportive housing arrangements (Aleghfeli and Hunt 2022; O’Higgins et al. 2018; Rana et al. 2011). To capitalise on the potential positive effects of foster care, it is essential to understand what contributes to a good foster home (Trenson et al. 2023; Van Holen et al. 2020). Some studies indicate that there is a significant benefit of foster care for URMIs due to the access to family care and support, trusted confidantes, help with asylum cases, and advocacy in negotiating key services (Ní Raghallaigh and Sirriyeh 2015; Sirriyeh 2010, 2013). The resources and positive experiences URMIs encounter in foster care, including family-like relationships with their foster parents, are underlined as central to their sense of home (Mörge and Rieker 2022; Sirriyeh 2013). Furthermore, the role of foster parents in facilitating contact with the child’s co-ethnic peers, birth families, and other networks is highlighted in previous research as enhancing predictability, continuity, and stability for URMIs (Crea et al. 2018; Rip et al. 2020a; Van Holen et al. 2020). The delicate balance between caregivers’ care practices and boundaries on the one side and the independence and agency required for URMIs to thrive and feel at home on the other side is also emphasised in some studies (Oppedal et al. 2009; Sirriyeh 2013; Svendsen et al. 2018; Wade 2019).

Moreover, URMIs’ experiences of home have been explored to varying extents in foster care within European contexts (e.g., Mörge and Rieker 2022; Ní Raghallaigh and Sirriyeh 2015; Rip et al. 2020b; Sirriyeh 2013), and in other types of housing arrangements, such as residential care within Nordic contexts (e.g., Börjesson and Söderqvist Forkby 2020; Garvik et al. 2016; Kauko and Forsberg 2018; Wernesjö 2015). Some of the relevant qualitative research addresses related themes, such as belonging and family-like relationships, particular during the initial phase of settlement. However, there is a notable gap in research exploring

how URMs (re)create a sense of home in foster care over the years and through follow-up studies. To our knowledge, the theoretical approach of homing, as suggested by [Boccagni \(2017\)](#), has not yet been researched from the perspective of URMs in a foster care setting.

2. Theoretical Framework

Migration involves a continuous home-making process where individuals seek to re-create normality in a new context ([Boccagni 2017](#)). This normality includes a place that is, "... unquestionably 'our' place, where our presence needs no justification" ([Boccagni and Kusenbach 2020](#), p. 597). For young people with backgrounds as unaccompanied refugee minors, moving into foster care in a new country can be described as a re-grounding process of being, doing, becoming and belonging ([Boccagni 2017](#); [Boccagni and Kusenbach 2020](#)). More specifically, a sense of home can be viewed as something young people carry with them (being), along with home as a practice (doing) of making themselves at home (becoming and belonging), including emotional, relational, and material dimensions. Therefore, homemaking involves individuals' engagement in a physical place, defined by [Boccagni \(2017\)](#) as an emotionally meaningful one, which is connected to social relations and practices. Home is not necessarily tied to, "material boundaries of a dwelling place" (p. 3).

Boccagni introduces the concept of homing in migration contexts, and describes it as a dynamic, performative, and interactive process of (re)creating a sense of home and belonging in everyday life. This involves a temporal process, as explained: "homing starts at present, is oriented to a future achievement or becoming, and yet is constitutively shaped by (the recovery of) the past" ([Boccagni 2022](#), p. 596). In this study, we focus on how young people (re)create a sense of home based on traces of the *past*, practices in the *present* and ideals and aspirations toward the future. Yet, past, present, and future are not understood as separated, 'static' entities. Instead, they are fluid and interconnected, continually shaping each other in the young people's experiences and (re)creations of home.

According to Boccagni, the core aspects of the home experience include an intertwined search for security, familiarity and control ([Boccagni 2017](#), p. 7). This means that for a place to be experienced as home, it must provide individuals with: a feeling of personal protection and integrity (security); stability, routine, and continuity (familiarity); and autonomy to use a specific place, to predict events in it, and to express oneself without public scrutiny (control) ([Boccagni 2017](#), p. 7). The three aspects— security, familiarity, and control—are examined through the lenses of emotional, relational, and material dimensions or resources, as highlighted by the young people in our study.

3. Materials and Methods

The first author conducted a longitudinal study, interviewing URMs in foster care twice over a time span of 5 to 10 months. The data collection took place from February 2022 to February 2023 and consisted of semi-structured photo-elicitation interviews ([Coyne and Carter 2018](#); [Epstein et al. 2006](#); [Harper 2002](#)). Eight URMs participated in the first interview, while seven participated in the second (see Figure 1). The second interview aimed to follow up and capture possible changes over time, along with enriching, clarifying and improving the quality of the data ([Boccagni 2017](#); [Laake et al. 2015](#)). While interviews with their foster parents were also conducted, this article focuses solely on the young people's perspectives.



Figure 1. Data Generation Process.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the first author met all the participants for a first ice-breaker meeting to get to know each other, address questions they might have, review the written consent, and plan the first interview. Following the first interviews, we contacted all participants again to organise a second interview (same procedure), of which one foster family withdrew. Before each interview, the participants were invited to bring photos into the interview depicting what they associated with feeling at home. By doing so, we intended to give participants room to steer the conversation and add new perspectives in accordance with the photo-elicitation method (Coyne and Carter 2018; Epstein et al. 2006). Participants who did not bring photos were asked what they would take photos of (imagined photos). In addition, the first author brought a collection of researcher-generated photos that participants could choose from into the interviews, especially with the youngest participants (Ammerman and Williams 2012; Coyne and Carter 2018). These photos were intended to add richness to the interview conversations, which was particularly important if participants did not bring photos themselves. In combination with the photos, the interview questions focused on what was important for them to feel at home including routines, important activities, places, or people in or outside of the foster care setting, as well as questions about their backgrounds, such as the role of heritage language, culture, and religion.

All the participants were interviewed in their foster homes; either in the garden, living room, or their own rooms, except for one participant in the second interview, who was interviewed in a formal meeting room due to logistical reasons. The interviews were carried out in Norwegian without the use of interpreters, as preferred by young people. The length of the 15 interviews was, on average, 1.5 h (58–150 min).

3.1. Participant Recruitment and Characteristics

Participants were recruited through Child Welfare Services in three parts of Norway, who communicated information about the research project to unaccompanied refugee minors and their foster parents. If the foster families agreed to share their contact information with us, we contacted them to inform them thoroughly about the project.

The young participants consisted of five boys and three girls, aged 14–22, who had lived in Norway for periods ranging from five to 12 years. They had resided in their current foster home for at least 1.5 years. Half of them moved in before turning 15, while the other half were 15 years or older when moving in. Most were born in South Asia, some in the Middle East, and one in East Africa. Half of them had been granted permanent residence permits, while the other half had recently obtained Norwegian citizenship. All young people had relatives in other countries with whom they maintained contact. For three of them, their birth parents had passed away. Two were in the process of applying for family reunification at the time of the first interview, one of whom had their family come to Norway by the second interview. Two of the young people lived in kinship foster care, while six of them lived in non-kinship foster care, where the foster parents had majority backgrounds. Their foster parents included both single parents and heterosexual couples.

3.2. Ethical Considerations

The Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (Sikt) evaluated the study before it was conducted. Throughout the study, we employed ethical sensitivity with special attention to our responsibility to prevent any harm to the participants involved (Banks and Brydon-Miller 2018; British Sociological Association 2017). Our positions as adult researchers with majority backgrounds and participants' positions as (a) children and young people, (b) with refugee backgrounds, and (c) in foster care have been carefully considered in designing the study and in disseminating the findings (British Sociological Association 2017; Hopkins 2008; Ní Raghallaigh 2013).

To encounter these ethical challenges, factors such as young people's age and mental health were discussed with, and considered by, child welfare workers during recruitment. We also used simpler descriptions, along with illustrations, in the written information for young people to clearly explain the purpose of the study and what participation involved (Hopkins 2008). Additionally, the interviewer reminded them of this information, along with their right to withdraw at any time, and how data were handled, to facilitate voluntary, informed participation and repeated consent (Klykken 2021). For young people under 18, informed consent was also obtained from their legal guardians.

Furthermore, participatory, visual methods such as photo-elicitation interviews aim to give participants space to define what is important for them by bringing forward their (non-verbal) perspectives (Coyne and Carter 2018; Epstein et al. 2006). This method facilitated a sensitive approach and a relaxed atmosphere, considering relational ethics of empathy, trust, and care (Banks and Brydon-Miller 2018; Coyne and Carter 2018; Kaukko et al. 2017). In addition, our study's design of following participants over time aimed to adopt a sensitive approach, for example, through reciprocity, getting to know each other, and listening to their views. It also gave us the possibility to clarify what they said in the first interview to avoid misunderstandings and misrepresentations (Hopkins 2008). Aiming to reduce the risk of triggering traumatic experiences, the interviewer did not, for instance, ask questions about why they had fled (Kaukko et al. 2017; Ní Raghallaigh 2013).

Direct or indirect personal information that can be linked to specific participants has been altered, rewritten in more general terms, or left out to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants (Hopkins 2008). Young people's photos have not been used in this article due to the risk of personal identification through specific places, relationships, or objects (Coyne and Carter 2018; Guillemin and Drew 2010). All data material is stored and managed in the Secure Storage of Research Data (SILAF).

4. Analytical Approach

During the analysis, we employed an abductive approach, including going back and forth between Boccagni's (2017) theoretical framework of homing and the empirical data. Data material was coded by the first author in Nvivo15, inspired by a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke 2019).

The analytical process was as follows: (i) Fourteen of the interviews were verbatim transcribed by the first author, while one was transcribed by a transcription firm and quality-checked by the first author (Braun and Clarke 2019). Transcribing and listening through the interviews facilitated analysing them as whole narratives with nuances before segmenting through coding (Sørly 2024). As a part of this process, the first author wrote down reflexive notes about the participants' experiences and methodological reflections; (ii) In the first round of coding in Nvivo15, we applied an inductive approach to grasp the participants' perspective through semantic codes that stick closely to what the participants say; (iii) Building on these codes, we discussed initial main themes organizing the participants' stories into commonalities through a process of going back and forth between

the codes and theory; (iv) Lastly, the first author revised, refined, and defined the themes more deductively, guided by the theoretical notion of homing (Boccagni 2017; Braun and Clarke 2019). As part of this process, we developed code descriptions of the concepts of security, familiarity, and control/autonomy to emphasise what young people highlighted as important for (re)creating a sense of home in foster care (Boccagni 2017). In this process, we found that autonomy was a more fitting code than control for our analysis (Christman 2014; Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000). In line with several ethics of care scholars, we argue that autonomy, particularly relational autonomy, is a more appropriate term that considers the mutuality characterising child–carer relationships, defined by both dependency and autonomy (Held 2005; Mackenzie 2014; Neagu 2021). In practice, we generated the three themes of young people (re)creating security, (re)creating familiarity, and (re)creating autonomy. Under each of these, we identified subthemes, as illustrated in Table 1. For example, under (Re)creating security, we identified subthemes, including Security through stability and familial relationships and From insecurity to becoming secure.

Table 1. Thematic Structure.

Theme	Subtheme	Brief Outline of Sub-Theme
(Re)creating security	Security through stability and familial relationships	Stability in living arrangements and familial ties that contribute to young people’s experiences of security (e.g., comfort, belonging, trust, and acceptance).
	From insecurity to becoming secure	Past experiences of insecurity (e.g., fear, exclusion, non-acceptance, mistrust)—highlight the importance of feeling and becoming secure.
(Re)creating familiarity	Becoming familiar in foster care	Family-like relationships and routines in foster care—illustrate how places, relationships, and practices have become familiar over time
	Familiarity through connecting to one’s heritage	Familiar places, relationships, and practices from young people’s heritage background through which they (re)create comforting experiences, emotions, and memories.
(Re)creating autonomy	Navigating independence and participation in the foster family	Young people’s navigation between independence and participation in daily life, e.g., decision-making, being heard, sharing household resources, and personalising their rooms.
	Becoming autonomous through supportive relationships	Foster care relationships enabling autonomy through practical and emotional support—to navigate transitions and achieve future aspirations beyond foster care.

5. Findings

Zooming in on the foster care context, our analysis indicates that the familial relationships URMs have built with foster parents and the resources and possibilities available to them (emotional, relational, and material/physical) are essential for their sense of home. Yet, their experiences and (re)creations of home are not solely rooted in the present, in which they live with their foster parents. Home involves a temporal process where they draw on past experiences, practices, and relationships, such as birth family and (childhood) friends.

These elements shape their current experiences and future aspirations of home. Young people's intertwined search for, or (re)creations of, security, familiarity, and autonomy are vital aspects in their stories about what is important for their sense of home (Boccagni 2017). Although recognising that the three aspects often overlap, the analysis is structured around each to highlight their distinct character and importance. Under each aspect, we exemplify how home is felt (emotional dimension) and how home is practised (relational and material/physical dimension). Respective experiences of not feeling at home, e.g., through insecurity, unfamiliarity, or lack of autonomy, are also presented.

5.1. (Re)Creating Security

In this section, we unpack the aspect of security in young people's narratives of (re)creating a sense of home. Young people explicitly mention "safety" and "security" when describing their experiences of what is important for their sense of home. Emotionally, security is defined by young people as their sense of being oneself, acceptance, comfort, inclusion and belonging in relation to living with a foster family or in Norway in general. Stability and familial relationships are essential in their experiences of security in foster care, thus (re)creating a sense of home, while the lack thereof reveals experiences of insecurity. Through the photo-elicitation method, images of the house or area where the young people live with their foster family and important relationships, including the foster family, birth family and friends, illustrate relational and material dimensions of security.

5.1.1. Security Through Stability and Familial Relationships

The young people exemplify how stability, such as not having to move, along with thriving in the familial relationships they had built in foster care, contribute to their experiences of security. One young person exemplifies various layers of security, including emotional, relational, and material dimensions that contribute to his sense of home:

My thoughts (about home) are that here I am now, I am safe [...], and where I am safe is my home. Now that they (Norwegian authorities) have accepted me, granted residency and everything, I feel at home [...]. Every day, I know that here in this house, I am safe, so this is my home. I know that there is someone (foster parent) who expects me to come home.

This young person emphasises that the place (Norway and the foster home) and the relationships (his foster parent), which make him feel safe, contribute to his sense of home. First, having a permanent residence permit; second, having a stable place to live; and third, the social stability of the foster parent waiting for him at home comforts him. Another young person highlights emotional and relational dimensions of feeling secure and comfortable in (foster care) relationships, including acceptance and trust:

I am only thriving if I am feeling safe. For example, with the people I am with, my friends or family. That I am home here (in the foster family) [...] I can be myself in a way and not pretend that I am someone else [...] And I feel that I can talk with them, for example, about anything.

This young person emphasises her search for or experience of feeling secure enough to be herself among her friends, foster family, and birth family. Overall, young people in this study predominantly describe their current foster family as a secure, comforting place to return to in their everyday lives and during challenging times. Many also highlight their aspirations for familial relationships in foster care that will last into the future. Comparing it with "any other family", one young person elaborates further on this point, expressing the expectation that these family relationships will endure after she moves out—something which cannot be taken for granted in a (non-kinship) foster family:

Even though this is a foster home, I don't have to move out when I turn 18 and not come back. [My foster parent] says this quite often, that this is my home [...] That this will always be my home. If I go home, then it's here, right (laughs) [...] just like any other family.

Through verbal reassurances like “this is your home” and treating young people as genuine family members, foster parents contribute to creating a place of normality for the young people through a stable, familial, and caring environment (Boccagni 2017).

5.1.2. From Insecurity to Becoming Secure: Experiences Across Multiple (Foster) Homes

When young people explain their feelings of home in their current foster homes, some contrast these with their past experiences, highlighting feelings of fear, exclusion, non-acceptance and mistrust they faced before/during their flight and across multiple (foster) homes. One young person showed the interviewer around his current foster family house, emphasising, “To feel at home is to feel safe. That you are not afraid of anybody”. He reflects on how he feels secure in the whole house—even in his foster parents' room—in contrast to his previous placement, where he felt afraid of his foster parents' behaviour, as he illustrates:

[My previous foster parents] were very protective of their things. I was afraid to use them. I thought if I used them, they might get mad at me [...] I wanted to buy food. Then [the foster parent] came and said, ‘What do you want?’ (with an angry voice) [...] I was always afraid.

As this example depicts, household resources and food symbolise fundamental elements challenged in previous foster family relationships, causing feelings of mistrust, not belonging and being unwelcome. Another young person also describes her previous foster family as ‘not-home-like’: “Every time I said or did something, it was shut down, so I felt like everything I said and did was wrong. So, I became very shy and withdrawn”. In contrast, young people emphasise their experiences of *becoming* secure within their current foster family. Feeling accepted and recognised as a part of the family through the foster parents showing ‘you belong here’ is essential, as one young person exemplifies:

Here, it is like ‘yes, you are a part of the family’ and ‘you must join everything’, or like, family things. For example, they have a family chat (via messaging app), and I am part of that. It was not like that in the other (previous) foster care homes. I knew they had a chat, but I was not part of it.

As this quote illustrates, feeling recognised as an equal family member—expressed verbally and through practices by their foster parents—can contribute to young people's sense of home and normality. These examples also reflect young people's transition from insecurity to an aspired sense of home that is inclusive and secure.

5.2. (Re)Creating Familiarity

The young people interviewed also reflect on how their sense of home derives from familiar things, places, people, and practices they feel comfortable with and seek to (re)create. Their stories indicate that they can be familiar with something, but it may result in discomfort or feeling ‘out-of-place’ if they do not like it. Being in a familiar place, with familiar people and activities they like, appears to be closely linked with their sense of security, highlighting the emotional dimension of familiarity. Relational or material elements they have become familiar with after moving to Norway, or from their birth country/family that they actively try to maintain, contribute to this sense of familiarity. Some examples of photos young people brought, chose, or imagined—which elicit stories of familiarity—include foster parents' (care) practices, the area, the house, their rooms, and objects representing

their backgrounds. Moreover, they convey a sense of comfort (re)created in everyday environments and through activities and practices that are important to them, sometimes intertwined with (re)connecting with their background, birth family or (childhood) friends.

5.2.1. Becoming Familiar in Foster Care

The young people's different experiences of familiarity and unfamiliarity illustrate adaptation processes and the complexities of (re)creating a sense of home. For example, they reflect on how familiarity is dynamic and temporal; the unfamiliar can become familiar, and the familiar can become unfamiliar over time. A young person exemplifies this with his experiences of unfamiliarity before moving to Norway and into his current foster home:

Maybe I didn't feel at home in [country of transit] because I was a stranger. But in Norway, now that I've lived here for so long [...] I feel at home here because of family, friends, and connections with different people [...] I had no such memories in [country of transit], so maybe that's why.

The extract above highlights that, over time, the steady building of relationships, memories and experiences in Norway allowed him to build a sense of home, moving from feeling like a stranger to feeling a sense of belonging. In addition, the example sheds light on how meaningful connections may be a key to doing so. Young people also highlight their foster parents' parental roles, including care practices, which contribute to a sense of familiarity. Some of them refer to how these care practices remind them of their birth parents' practices of care, creating a sense of continuity and normality, as one young person expresses:

They (foster parents) take care of me and ask all the time, 'How are you?' when I go out and such, they call me, 'How are you doing?', 'Do you need anything?', 'When are you coming home?' [...] My mom (birth parent) has always been like that, so it was normal [...] She (foster mom) has acted like a mother to me.

Many young people call their foster parents mom/dad, which connotes a display of connectedness and a co-creation of foster parents as parental figures. Simultaneously, they describe them as "like family", although they are not being their "real" parents. Another young person elaborates on this: "It is just like your mother, who helps you with everything. School. Help with what you need. Then you feel it is like a home [...] It is just like your mom and dad, not for real, but ..." This extract depicts how foster parents perform roles and behaviours that are family-like and familiar to young people, such as showing concern, providing support, and being involved in their everyday lives. These co-created familial relationships reflect an engagement in, search for, and creation of familiar patterns of care that resemble their ideals of parental figures or experiences with their birth parents.

Photos of the area, the house, and young people's rooms in their current foster home elicit stories about material/physical dimensions of familiarity, which they appreciate and feel belonging to—something which has become homely over time, as another young person illustrates:

Like this picture here (of a nearby street) ... I took it ... It's a street, right over there (by the house). And when I come home, and I'm going out with friends, and so on, I go this way [...] And when you walk here, look around and so on ... Then you feel 'Ah!' You close your eyes and breathe and think 'Now I'm home,' so to speak. Like here (picture of the house), when I come home, you see the house, and you immediately think 'ah (exhales), this is home'" [...] When you come home and see the garden and the walls here and ... that sofa over there, it's like, you ... [...] It's a sense of home, you could say.

This young person describes in detail a routine of going back and forth between the house (foster care) and the outside world (e.g., meeting friends, going to school or work). He underlines how, when he comes back, he feels relaxed and comfortable, highlighting the security of the familiar. More specifically, familiarity with their surroundings may cultivate a sense of security, allowing them to know the place and the people and anticipate what to expect.

One of the young people imagined she would take a photo of 'eating together' in the foster family, which she associates with a sense of home: "If I were to take a picture of something, I would take a picture of a family dinner on a Sunday". For her, this repeated family gathering represents something familiar and cosy, which she enjoys. However, the food served is not what she was familiar with from her background; it is something she has become familiar with and now likes. Even though young people's tastes, preferences, and needs may change over time, some also highlight the need to (re)connect to their heritage through, for example, specific food, music, or religious practices. In the following section, we dive further into how young people (re)create a sense of home by connecting with familiar elements from their backgrounds.

5.2.2. Familiarity Through Connecting to One's Heritage

The frequency of contact with birth family as well as friends with a similar background varies among the young people we interviewed. Consequently, their possibilities to (re)create a sense of familiarity related to their background through these relationships and/or communities also vary. For example, some express that they do not remember anything from their birth countries or have no contact with childhood friends or family abroad. Others refer to how shared memories are (re)created through digital or physical contact with childhood friends and birth family. One young person describes how complex this can be; he is lucky to have one childhood friend, but there are still parts missing, and he shares how this affects him:

[T]hat is what bothers me sometimes; I have good memories with them (childhood friends), and I want to talk to them, but I can't. I don't know where they are. Some, I've seen myself that they died, and some I've lost track of [...] My childhood friend and I were poor; we didn't have much money, and he said to me: 'One day, you and I are going to be rich, and we are going to do this and that and go here and there'. We were just dreaming. Today, we have those things, so I told him that, and he started crying right away.

This quote shows how a sense of deep connection and continuity between past, present, and future—exemplified by a childhood friend—enables the (re)creation of familiarity through shared experiences, memories, and dreams. However, a sense of discontinuity or longing can arise from loss, separation, or physical distance. Although young people have varying contact with their birth families and/or friends—locally or transnationally—they all underline the importance of maintaining them to some degree. Some young people emphasise that the contact they have with their birth families, for instance, is not something they share with their foster parents, and thus, some foster parents are not aware of how much, or if, the youth have contact with them at all. Others describe how their foster parents help facilitate contact with their birth families by inviting them over or travelling together to the countries where they live.

One of the young people showed a photo from inside his relatives' house, highlighting his sense of belonging to more than one place: "I have two homes. Here (the foster family) and with my [relative]". Parallel to other young people, this young person illustrates a familiar, sensorial experience when he smells spices from his birth country: "[T]he moment I smell it, I think 'I have experienced this smell earlier in my life'".

Connecting to familiar elements from one's background often seems to depend on relationships. However, young people also illustrate how they (re)created a sense of home through, for example, music or religious practices without the physical presence of others. One young person living in a foster family with a majority background showed a playlist of songs from his birth country: "The more I listen to it, the better I can understand [...] So I don't forget the language (my mother tongue) completely [...] Many memories come up (when I listen to it)". Another young person living in a kinship foster family imagined a photo of her prayer rug: "I feel at home when I pray, then I feel safe". These examples show how familiarity is intertwined with autonomy and/or security. They also illustrate how young people connect to comforting memories and feelings—a part of their identities—through sensory experiences, symbolic objects, or practices, which might be more or less accessible in their foster care environments.

In contrast, some young people share how places or relationships that were once familiar can become unfamiliar over time. One young person contemplates his experience of when his birth family was reunited with him in Norway, and consequently, he had to move out of foster care. His reflections are an example of navigating different belongings to places, cultures, and relationships:

And then I felt, when they (birth family) came, that I wasn't really the old [me], you could say [...] It's been [many years] ... So, in a way, I don't really know them [...] I'm glad they came here. They can have a future and all that, but ... [...] You don't have the same mindset as they do. And they don't have the same mindset as I do [...] And suddenly you have to move from this house to another one ... It's hard. Because this is where you belong (in the foster family), this is where you feel at home, and then you have to move.

As shown, young people may experience both joy about being reunited with their birth families and sadness since they can no longer live with their foster families. Following young people and their foster families over time revealed changes such as family reunification or moving to a new city or house, illustrating how emotions, relationships or materialities change accordingly. However, co-creating (lasting) familial relationships between young people and their foster parents, which may enable them to have contact after moving out, provides an anchor of continuity and support to navigate this (sometimes) ambivalent terrain.

5.3. (Re)Creating Autonomy

In this section, we use the concept of autonomy as an aspect of young people's sense of home in foster care rather than control, as conceptualised by [Boccagni \(2017\)](#). Positioned as children in foster families, our young participants do not anticipate (full) control over their environment and everyday routines; however, they expect to be supported, heard and involved in decision-making. We thus understand autonomy as a relational process interlinked with emotional and material dimensions ([Boccagni 2017](#); [Christman 2014](#); [Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000](#)). Young people's access to space and household resources reflects a process of sharing and participation characterised by foster parents giving access or making house rules while young people demonstrate responsibility. Furthermore, this process is defined by mutual respect, recognition and trust. Through photos of their rooms, relationships and places in foster care, young people elicited stories that reflect their experiences of relational autonomy, in contrast with feelings of being guests or outsiders. Having the possibility (or not) to use and personalise their (familiar) living spaces, as well as accessing and sharing household resources through (secure) foster care relationships, illustrate how autonomy is enabled (or hindered) in foster care. Being part of a foster family can create tensions that young people must navigate. However, when they are included

and recognised as autonomous members of the home and family and are supported in their future aspirations, it seems to contribute to their sense of home.

5.3.1. Navigating Independence and Participation in the Foster Family

The young people describe how they navigate independence and participation in foster care, balancing a sense of freedom with responsibility. Autonomy was achieved through reciprocity, as one young person expresses: “[My foster parent] has said to me, ‘as long as you are nice and do not do anything stupid, we do not have rules’ [...] I can do what I want, I am a free man”. Another youth explained it as follows: “I have not felt that there is anyone else who decides for me. I do what I want to do and what I need”. These examples suggest that foster parents trust and recognise young people as autonomous and responsible. This seems to relate to age in our study; the slightly older youths expressed fewer rules. Over time, some younger participants describe gaining more autonomy through fewer rules and by showing more responsibility, as expressed in a second interview: “Now I am 16, now I can come home whenever I want. But at the same time, they (foster parents) want to know where I am, and I should not come home too late”. In addition, their navigation between independence and participation involves negotiations and compromises: “If there are disagreements in the (foster) family, you see, we reach a compromise where everyone benefits a little, instead of just one person making the decisions [...] We consider each other’s needs [...] And we respect each other”.

Most young people express that they are satisfied with how much they get to decide or how often they are heard in their current foster home. Only a few mention disagreements in relation to this, including feeling restricted in their autonomy. One young person, for example, emphasises how he has been used to managing his own life from a young age, as illustrated below:

In [my birth country], I didn’t have any curfew rules, and as soon as I came here, to [the asylum centre], there were rules, and it’s very difficult to adjust to that when you learn it at such a late age [...] I wasn’t outside all the time, but I was often out with friends, playing and doing things (in my country of birth)— when I came here, there were rules I had to stick to [...] I have to go to bed at [a specific time], and I’m actually grateful for that because I do so much better at school the next day.

Young people’s past experiences with restrictions and autonomy may influence how they perceive their current circumstances. However, as the young person also emphasises above, certain restrictions, such as having a set bedtime, are appreciated as they enhance, e.g., performance in school, something he aspires to. The example also highlights the contrast between independence without restrictions and independence with responsibility for young people in foster care, underscoring the importance of balancing the dynamics of being part of a foster family with independence.

Furthermore, young people exemplify participating in everyday decisions in foster care: “For example, dinner [...] Or if we are going to have new curtains, for example, the colour. It’s basically just little things”. Being part of small everyday decisions is thus crucial for simultaneously feeling independent and included in the foster family. In line with what is emphasised in the section about security, foster parents’ explicit recognition of young people as a part of the home and family is also essential for their experiences of autonomy. For example, when foster parents recognise that they share the material things and space in the home, it enhances young people’s sense of security and allows them to act autonomously: “(My foster parent says) ‘It is our car, our house, *our* things. Not just yours or mine. We share these things’ [...] It gives you some security. You can feel at home”.

Additionally, young people's active role in creating a familiar space through decorating their rooms with objects of personal value or arranging them according to their needs and tastes also signifies autonomy. As one young person exemplifies through showing a photo of his room: "All the walls were [one colour] [...], and then after a few months, I thought 'okay, we need to paint them [another colour]' and then 'yeah, yeah,' said [foster parent] (in a benevolent tone)". This example underscores young people's active role in personalising their space over time, further indicating the presence of a secure environment in foster care that enables them to do so.

5.3.2. Becoming Autonomous Through Supportive Relationships

In foster care relationships that enable autonomy, young people are supported and guided to explore their identities and navigate multiple transitions, including transitioning into the foster family (within foster care), as well as into the broader society and adulthood (beyond foster care). One young person shares her experience of becoming more autonomous when she moved into her current foster family:

Since I moved into [this foster family], I have tried to find my place because before (in a previous foster family), I did not feel like I had a voice, and what I said didn't really matter because I had to go through someone, like asking the caseworker [...]. So, when I moved (into this foster family), I gained a bit of a voice and the opportunity to do what I want [...]. I am still working on figuring it out and who I am.

This example underscores the crucial role of foster parents in providing an environment where young people feel heard and valued. In addition, young people highlight the help they get from foster parents with schoolwork, learning Norwegian, and transitioning to adulthood, e.g., saving money for a future apartment. Some young people underscore school as necessary "to achieve a better life". One young person shared an image he had made with mountains symbolising the difficulties of life and his foster parent, who has helped him through these challenging times:

Life has so many difficulties; it goes up and down and up and down. But if you want to achieve goals, you must endure the hard things that happen in life ... We have people who come and care for us. For example, I have [a foster parent] who cares about me. And [my foster parent] helps me navigate through difficult situations and challenges ... [My foster parent] supports me in the goals I want to reach [...]. For example, I have now got my driver's license.

This example underlines how a sense of relational autonomy, personal development and social mobility as potential future aspirations for young people can be fostered through practical and emotional support and guidance from foster parents. Another young person elaborates further on this point with advice for child welfare workers and foster parents:

If you (child welfare workers) find a foster home that fits a child, it helps that child get a sense of normality. If you (the foster family) provide them with completely normal things, it makes it much easier for the child to eventually move out on their own. And to have hope [...]. [Children who do not have that support] struggle with things that many people take for granted [...]. Like routines, you know ...

As this quote illustrates, "normality"—understood as what other young people in society may have access to through their (birth) family practices of home—is vital for their transition to independent adulthood. This is especially important given the socioeconomic situation of having arrived as unaccompanied minors in a new country, often without any material or relational support. While having already accomplished a lot by themselves,

the young people interviewed emphasise the importance of supportive relationships in new contexts, not least their foster parents, to cultivate belonging and a hopeful outlook for the future.

6. Discussion

This study explored what unaccompanied refugee minors (URMs) emphasised as important to (re)create a sense of home in foster care over time. Through an abductive analytical process between the interviews with young people and [Boccagni's \(2017\)](#) conceptualisation of homing, we structured our findings into three main themes, highlighting how young people (re)create security, familiarity, and autonomy in foster care. First, young people stressed the importance of stability in the foster home, including a place to return to and familial relationships as a source of security. Second, young people emphasised the importance of becoming familiar with foster parents' practices, material surroundings, and everyday routines, as well as connecting to their heritage background, including cultural and religious practices and contact with their birth families and (childhood) friends. Third, young people navigated between their participation in the foster families and their need for independence, which emphasised the importance of relational autonomy. Across themes, our analysis unpacks how their sense of home is an intertwined process of security, familiarity, and autonomy connected to their past experiences and aspired futures.

All children and young people who move into foster care experience some degree of emotional, relational and material/physical uprooting ([Bengtsson and Luckow 2020](#); [Hedin 2014](#); [Phoenix 2016](#); [Schofield 2002](#)). For URMs, this uprooting also involves moving from one country to another, with different smells, tastes, and sounds, on top of past traumatic experiences and uncertainties related to the birth families they left behind and/or their asylum cases ([Ahmed 1999](#); [Boccagni 2017](#); [Crea et al. 2018](#); [Mitra and Hodes 2019](#)). Migration scholars have highlighted that temporary immigration statuses challenge stability and predictability as opposed to feeling secure and at home due to uncertainties about their futures ([Chase 2013](#); [Kohli 2011](#)). Our study contributes to filling the gap in research regarding URMs' experiences at a later phase when they have obtained permanent residence permits or citizenship. Voicing the perspective of URMs over time, our study contributes important insights into how they (re)create a sense of home in foster care. Moreover, our findings inform existing research on what contributes to a supportive foster care environment for URMs (see, e.g., [Garvik et al. 2016](#); [Rip et al. 2020b](#); [Svendsen et al. 2018](#); [Van Holen et al. 2020](#); [Wernesjö 2015](#)). We will discuss these findings' implications for child welfare services (CWS) and foster parents' practices: How can a supportive foster care environment facilitate young people's (re)creations of security, familiarity and autonomy?

6.1. Supporting Stability and Familial Relationships

Given that stability and familial relationships were highlighted as crucial in (re)creating a sense of security, it is essential that foster parents actively validate that URMs are equal members of the shared home and family, thereby supporting young people's sense of security. Foster parents can also support this through caring and family-like behaviours, such as showing concern or including them in routines in the foster family, echoing other studies with URMs in foster care ([Kohli et al. 2010](#); [Ní Raghallaigh and Sirriyeh 2015](#); [Sirriyeh and Ní Raghallaigh 2018](#); [Wade 2019](#)). We argue, in agreement with other scholars, that practices contributing to establishing family-like relationships simultaneously enhance URMs' sense of security, normality and home ([Rip et al. 2020b](#); [Sirriyeh 2013](#); [Wade 2019](#)). Reciprocity, good communication, acceptance, trust, recognition, open-mindedness, hospitality and 'emotional warmth' are some essential practices in foster families that allow

URMs to express their identities without fear of discrimination and exclusion (Hedin 2014; Hedin et al. 2012; Sirriyeh 2013).

In their study of belonging in foster care, Bengtsson and Luckow (2020) highlight the distinction between emotional and functional belonging in children's experiences. Emotional belonging involves family connectedness and a strong attachment to the place. On the other hand, functional belonging focuses more on practical help from foster parents rather than on the same degree of intimate emotions towards them. Other studies, specifically focusing on URM, similarly emphasise variations in their home experiences; while some feel at home emotionally, others experience it more as an everyday place or a functional home (Mörten and Rieker 2022; Wade 2019). For young people in foster families that are visibly and culturally different from them, a sense of belonging becomes particularly important (Phoenix 2016; Rip et al. 2020b). While young people in our study highlighted the help they got from foster parents and the 'function' of living in foster care, several expressed an emotional attachment to their place of foster care and anticipated long-lasting familial relationships with their foster parents, which signifies emotional belonging. The division between young people who experienced their foster home as an emotional versus functional home was not noticeable in our study. Instead, they seemed mutually constitutive in young people's experiences; for instance, they defined their foster parents as their family *because* they had helped them. Our study thus reflects what Kohli (2011) underscores: "For children who may have moved away from family, friends, locations and a sense of entitlement to a home, the need to belong to someone, to somewhere, becomes a conscious goal" (Kohli 2011, p. 315).

In this vein, our analysis illuminated how young people's sense of home was reinforced when they felt that foster parents were committed to them—like any other family—beyond the formal foster care arrangement. Young people's aspired, lasting familial relationships in their transition to adulthood is also highlighted as important in other foster care research (Biehal 2014; Christiansen et al. 2013; Hedin 2014; Join-Lambert and Reimer 2022; Schofield 2002). This underscores the crucial role that aftercare services might have for young people in general and URM specifically (Ní Raghallaigh and Thornton 2017; Paulsen et al. 2020). The right to aftercare until age 25 (Child Welfare Act 2021, sct. 1–3) is thus an important measure since CWS may continue the placement beyond age 18. While our analysis emphasises the benefits of adopting a life course perspective that encourages long-term relationships when young people transition into adulthood, several barriers may exist. Similarly to many other European countries (Reimer 2021), Norway is currently experiencing a significant shortage of foster families (NOU 2023). When between 200 and 300 children are waiting for a foster home, CWS' main focus may be to encourage existing foster families to accept a new child. While foster care comes with specific boundaries set by the CWS, relationships are more fluid and have the potential to last beyond those boundaries (Christiansen et al. 2013; Sirriyeh and Ní Raghallaigh 2018). A follow-up study of URM exiting foster care would be beneficial to explore the change, permanence and barriers of these relationships.

While relational continuity is considered important for children in foster care in general, cultural continuity is especially important for children with migrant or refugee background (Tonheim et al. 2025), which we delve further into below.

6.2. Supporting Familiarity and Connections to Young People's Heritage

Our study illuminated that a sense of home for URM extended beyond the physical foster home, encompassing relational and emotional connections outside the foster care setting. For instance, it was vital for URM in our study to (re)connect with their (transnational) birth family, childhood friends, and community peers. It is thus important that the

CWS and foster parents are aware of and facilitate URMs' contact with their birth families and friends, both locally and transnationally. Compared to other young people in foster care, URMs' birth family relations and friends—who may not be physically present—are often more invisible to CWS and foster parents (Mendoza Pérez and Morgade Salgado 2019; Rip et al. 2020b), as well as in foster care policies in several European countries (Tonheim et al. 2025). Yet, these relationships may still be psychologically and emotionally present, providing social support and continuity (Oppedal and Idsoe 2015). However, benefits and needs vary among URMs, and therefore, foster parents must approach this with openness, inclusiveness, and sensitivity (Aleghfeli and Hunt 2022; Luster et al. 2009; Ní Raghallaigh and Sirriyeh 2015; Rana et al. 2011; Trenson et al. 2023). Foster parents may need specific guidance and supervision on this matter (Tonheim et al. 2025).

At the same time, what was once familiar can become unfamiliar due to evolving circumstances and changing preferences and needs, exemplified by family reunification in our study. For URMs, this may result in renegotiating their ties—both to their heritage and their current environment. Supporting this process also requires flexibility within the policy framework. For instance, the current policy requires young people to live with their family for five years (Immigration Act 2008, sct. 62) and places significant demands on them to take responsibility for their families (Bergset et al. 2024). These restrictions can limit their agency and create unequal opportunities compared to their peers.

Maintaining connections to one's heritage background, whether through family, language or cultural practices, has been highlighted as a protective factor in other studies with URMs (Luster et al. 2009; Pieloch et al. 2016; Trenson et al. 2023). The young people in our study demonstrated agency in connecting to comforting memories and feelings of familiarity through sensory experiences such as food, music or religious practices, which did not necessarily depend on their foster parents. However, the role of foster parents remains significant. Wade (2019) and Kohli et al. (2010) specifically emphasise the importance of foster parents in facilitating such connections, for example, cooking familiar foods, “enabling young people to feel more at home” (Wade 2019, p. 386). Our findings indicated that the relational and material resources to maintain connections to their heritage were accessible to varying extents.

Although our analysis did not specifically compare young people's sense of home in kinship and non-kinship foster care, both seem to have advantages and disadvantages (Fazel et al. 2012; O'Higgins et al. 2018; Rip et al. 2020b; Trenson et al. 2023). Some previous research highlights the importance of the quality of the relationship with foster parents, through which young people can feel loved and respected in their identity (Crea et al. 2018; Rip et al. 2020b; Sirriyeh and Ní Raghallaigh 2018; Van Holen et al. 2020). Other studies find that for children and youth who ‘lose’ their heritage language and cultural belonging, this may challenge their identity formation and self-understanding as well as their relationships with birth parents, (transnational) family and co-ethnic peers (cf. Brown et al. 2009; Degener et al. 2020, 2022). Future studies should further explore the role and meaning of URMs' cultural, religious, and linguistic backgrounds to provide deeper insights into their needs for cultural continuity in foster care (Tonheim et al. 2025).

6.3. Supporting Relational Autonomy

A sense of autonomy was found to be an essential part of homemaking and ‘feeling at home’ for young people in our study. We argue that the way young people are treated by their foster parents (and significant others) determines their sense of autonomy and capacity for agency. This does not only include expressions of respect and recognition but also resources available (Christman 2014). The concept of relational autonomy brings significant insights to the child welfare field, particularly when considering the experiences

of URMs in foster care. This theoretical perspective highlights the importance of reciprocity in fostering autonomy, suggesting that autonomy is not simply an individual achievement but is cultivated through relationships with others. [Held \(2005\)](#) and [Mackenzie and Stoljar \(2000\)](#) argue that autonomy is relational and that interdependence with others is crucial for its development. This relational perspective on autonomy emphasises the role of supportive, caring relationships in helping individuals navigate the balance between independence and belonging.

In the context of URMs, relational autonomy provides a more nuanced lens than the traditional focus on independence. [Oppedal et al. \(2009\)](#) and others (e.g., [Sirriyeh 2013](#); [Svendsen et al. 2018](#); [Wade 2019](#)) emphasise that URMs require both care and the opportunity to develop independence. [Horgan and Ní Raghallaigh \(2017\)](#) highlight the delicate balance between providing care and protection to URMs and enabling them to develop resilience and autonomy. While this perspective is valuable, it tends to frame care and autonomy as somewhat opposing forces. By contrast, relational autonomy suggests that autonomy can and should be developed within caring relationships, where young people are given the emotional and practical support they need to make autonomous decisions, particularly in the secure environment of foster care.

For URMs, ‘higher support settings’, such as the foster care setting, may offer less autonomy than other forms of care, such as group homes or residential facilities ([Mitra and Hodes 2019](#)). However, it also provides the opportunity for relational autonomy to flourish. The close, supportive relationships in foster care enable URMs to explore their autonomy while still being part of a family system that offers trust, care, and respect. The dynamic tension between independence and care—which is often emphasised in the literature—can be navigated more effectively within the framework of relational autonomy. This relational perspective sees autonomy as both a personal and relational achievement ([Christman 2014](#)). Foster parents can support young people’s sense of autonomy and capacity to act autonomously by creating a safe space for independence while maintaining relational bonds that allow for mutual respect, emotional support, and guidance.

CWS and foster parents should thus involve URMs in decision-making processes related to their care and daily lives to enhance their sense of autonomy and capacity for agency. It is important that young people are being encouraged to express their views, listened to, and taken seriously by their foster parents ([Pölkki et al. 2012](#)). It is also important to be aware that they can communicate their needs in subtle ways of non-verbal communication, as was exemplified in our study through stories of withdrawal in an insecure environment. In addition, practitioners should be aware that young people can sometimes remain silent about their past ([Kohli 2006](#)).

6.4. Individual Variations in Young People’s Foster Care Experiences

While several studies point to the positive impacts foster care can have on URMs, it does not guarantee success ([O’Higgins et al. 2018](#); [Trenson et al. 2023](#); [Van Holen et al. 2020](#)). There are notable variations in URMs’ foster care experiences, and they will not all necessarily thrive just because they live in a foster family ([Horgan and Ní Raghallaigh 2017](#); [Mörge and Rieker 2022](#)). Some young people in our study shared their experiences of *not* feeling secure in their previous foster families. Becoming secure only happened over time after they moved into a new foster family. Thus, disruption in foster care is not always negative; at times, it is necessary for them to thrive ([Van Holen et al. 2020](#)).

The ways in which young people valued and navigated security, familiarity, and autonomy varied across our study, shaped by factors such as age, time spent in foster care, cultural background, family dynamics, and prior experiences ([Rip et al. 2020b](#); [Wade et al. 2012](#)). For instance, our findings reflected how young people made sense of their

home experiences by drawing on past experiences. Moreover, it is crucial that CWS and foster parents recognise individual variations and the complexity of young people's home experiences. Further research on various intersecting factors, particularly how age, gender, and ethnicity shape URM's experiences and foster parents' practices, would offer valuable insights for future research and practice.

6.5. Strengths and Limitations of the Study

Overall, the young participants recruited in this study expressed satisfaction with their current foster families and feeling at home. This might indicate that we did not recruit young people who are dissatisfied with their placement or those who have a more 'cautious sense of belonging' to their foster homes (Christiansen et al. 2013). A crucial ethical challenge of this is that young people who are considered more vulnerable by the child welfare services, or who do not have a positive relationship with their current foster family, did not want to participate in the study or were not informed about the project by the child welfare workers. In addition, participants in the study may have been reluctant to share more negative experiences. However, as indicated throughout the findings, some participants shared their retrospective experiences of not feeling at home, which provided useful insights into possible challenges that may arise. Moreover, the study's focus on 'feeling at home in foster care' might have encouraged both recruitment and stories of successful foster care, which is both a strength and a limitation. It is important to note that this study does not capture what is important for all; URM's are a heterogeneous group with diverse backgrounds, migration histories and needs (Derluyn 2018). Our study predominantly emphasised the foster home environment, with less attention given to the surrounding context, such as school, leisure activities or experiences of discrimination.

The theoretical framework of homing adds important insights and theoretical contributions to the knowledge base on URM's experiences and practices of home. However, some scholars have criticised the concept of home for being inherently positive, all-encompassing and lacking conceptual clarity (Boccagni 2017, p. 13). In addition to home being a difficult concept to define and understand, language barriers may also have affected participants' comprehension and the quality of interview conversations. We tried to overcome these challenges through the study's design. For example, the photos young people brought, chose, or imagined helped strengthen their participation. Additionally, this visual method revealed more 'hidden' dimensions of their home experiences and practices, which is a strength of the study. Conducting a longitudinal study of interviewing young people at two points in time also adds richness to the data and, thus, increases the validity of the findings through data triangulation.

7. Conclusions

The findings from this study show that unaccompanied refugee minors' experiences of security, familiarity, and autonomy are important for (re)creating a sense of home in foster care. The familial relationships they have built through foster care and the available emotional, relational and material resources are essential to this process. In addition, this study provides insights into young people's participation and continuous navigation of belonging in daily life. Recognising them both as active agents *and* needing social support is thus a crucial policy and practice implication.

As young people draw on past experiences and future aspirations and adapt to changing circumstances, their needs, preferences, and practices evolve. This makes the (re)creation of a sense of home a dynamic and ongoing process. Consistent emotional and practical support from stable foster care relationships is vital throughout transitions, including into adulthood. Child welfare workers and foster parents must understand

and consider young people's diverse and evolving needs, particularly in relation to their connections with their heritage background, birth families, and foster families.

Our young participants' stories of unhomey foster care experiences before their current positive one highlight that it is not foster care per se but foster care with certain characteristics and qualities that nurture a sense of home and belonging for UMRs. The significance of young people's sense of home in foster care appears to be essential for the success of the placement. Therefore, foster parents may benefit from guidance and training from child welfare services on various ways to support UMRs in (re)creating a sense of home. Our study, thus, contributes to the growing knowledge base of how foster care can support UMRs' homemaking processes and wellbeing. To enhance this further, future research should investigate the role and meaning of continuity in foster care for UMRs.

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Note

¹ URM who have been granted temporary residence permits are not included in these numbers.

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