

lonely  
in the crowd

**INTERACTION DESIGN  
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CONTENTS

CONTEXT INQUIRY ..... 6

PLACES .....6

INQUIRY METHOD.....10

OPEN INTERVIEWS WITH STRANGERS.....11

STORIES OF FEELING CONNECTED.....14

INQUIRY CONCLUSION .....19

CONTEXT INQUIRY

PLACES

To continue my work and make a clear inquiry I need to decide in what kind of space I’m going to be working. During the last weeks I thought about making some sort of interactive Installation in public space. A space with lots of people that are strangers to each other and some of them feeling lonely in the crowd. The difficulty is to find a space where people do have a little time to deal with the project and are willing to change something in their current situation. At the train station people are mostly in a hurry and don’t want to get distracted by something, it would be really hard to get them out of their daily routine. Instead, the meeting point at the main train station is a place where everyone is waiting for someone to arrive, so they all do have time. But the problem we face here is a different one. Nobody is really interested in making new friends here, because they are all waiting for someone else to show up in a minute. In order to be able to prepare my context inquiry I need to know what situation I’ll be working with. I made my decision by comparing different places that are suitable directly to each other and thinking about their meaning to the public.

Comparison

	people	strangers	time	loneliness
Meeting point	****	*****	**	**
Train station	*****	*****	*	****
In the Train	***	****	*****	**
University	****	**	***	**
Airport	*****	*****	***	**
Museum	**	****	***	*
Park	**	****	*****	**
Shopping mall	****	*****	**	*
In the Tram	***	****	**	**

**people**, how many people gather here. **strangers**, how many people are strangers to each others. **time**, how much free time do people have at this place. **loneliness**, how likely is it that people feel lonely here.

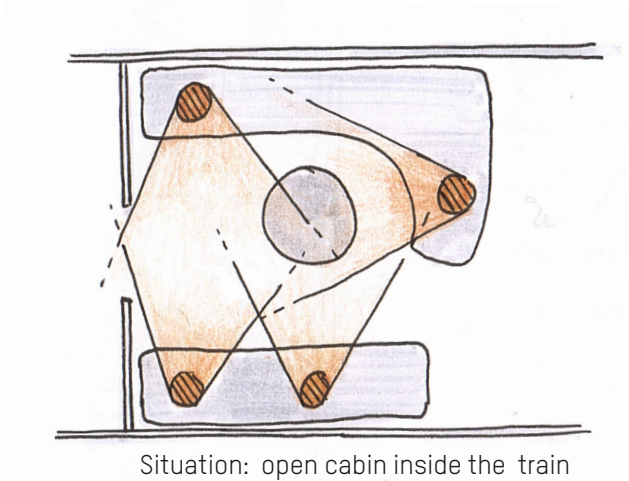
Place of interest

The train offers a situation where a lot of strangers come together, some of them maybe familiar but still strangers. Everyone has time until the train arrives at their desired destination. Many people are busy with reading newspaper, working, sleeping, listening to music or just watching the landscape passing by. In my opinion a lot of them are just doing what their doing to bridge the time gap, not because they are really into it. And if you start watching the people you suddenly start to feel a certain loneliness because everyone else is acting so busy. It almost seams impossible to get in touch with someone.

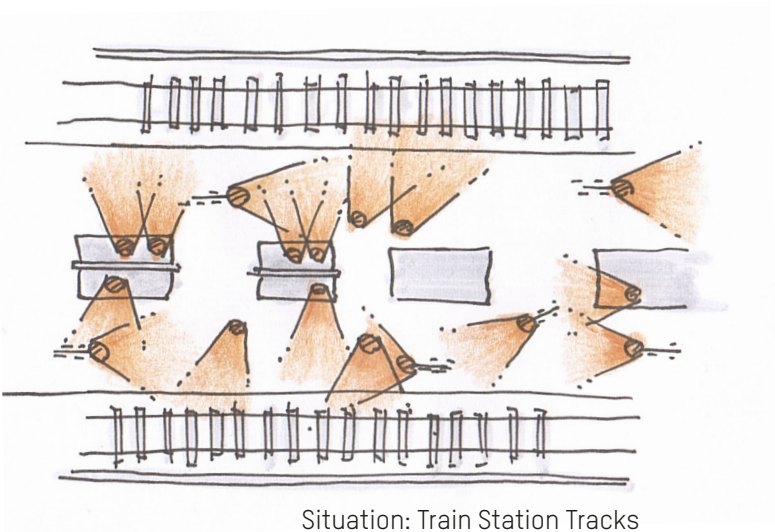
Therefor the train would be a perfect place to make people aware of the surrounding strangers and try to connect them in some way. Without having done any further research I’d say that, compared to other public transportation vehicles like the Tram, the train offers a better time range for a discussion. In a Tram passengers often only stay a couple of minutes, where in the train they stay from ten minutes up to two hours.

Field of view

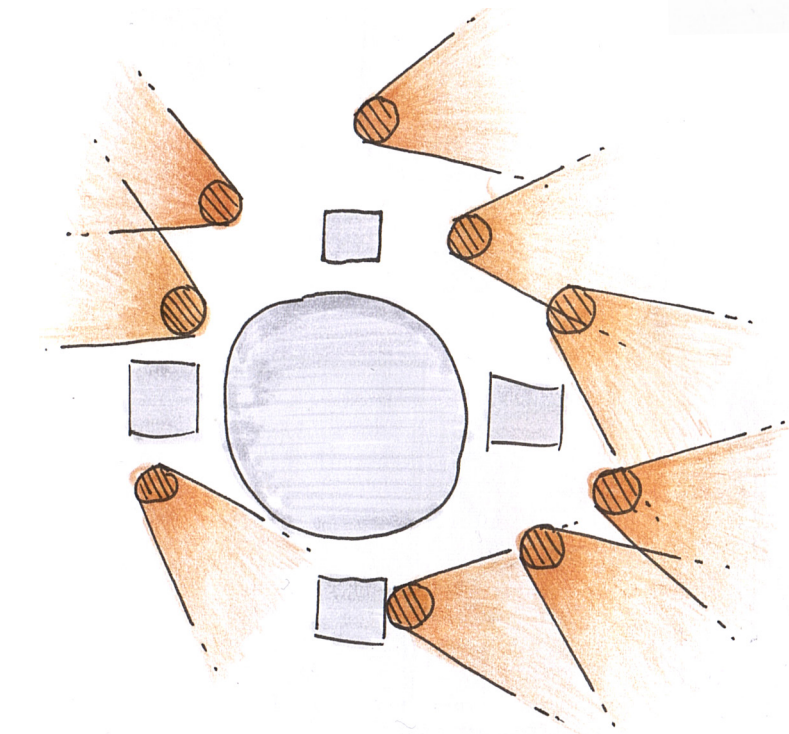
To get a better understanding about the different places I visualized the fields of view of the persons present. By observing the places I learned that People sitting or waiting are usually much more receptive for impressions than those walking or hurrying through crowded places. Busy people often walk around with a tunnel view, they are absent, constantly thinking about other stuff than the environment around them.



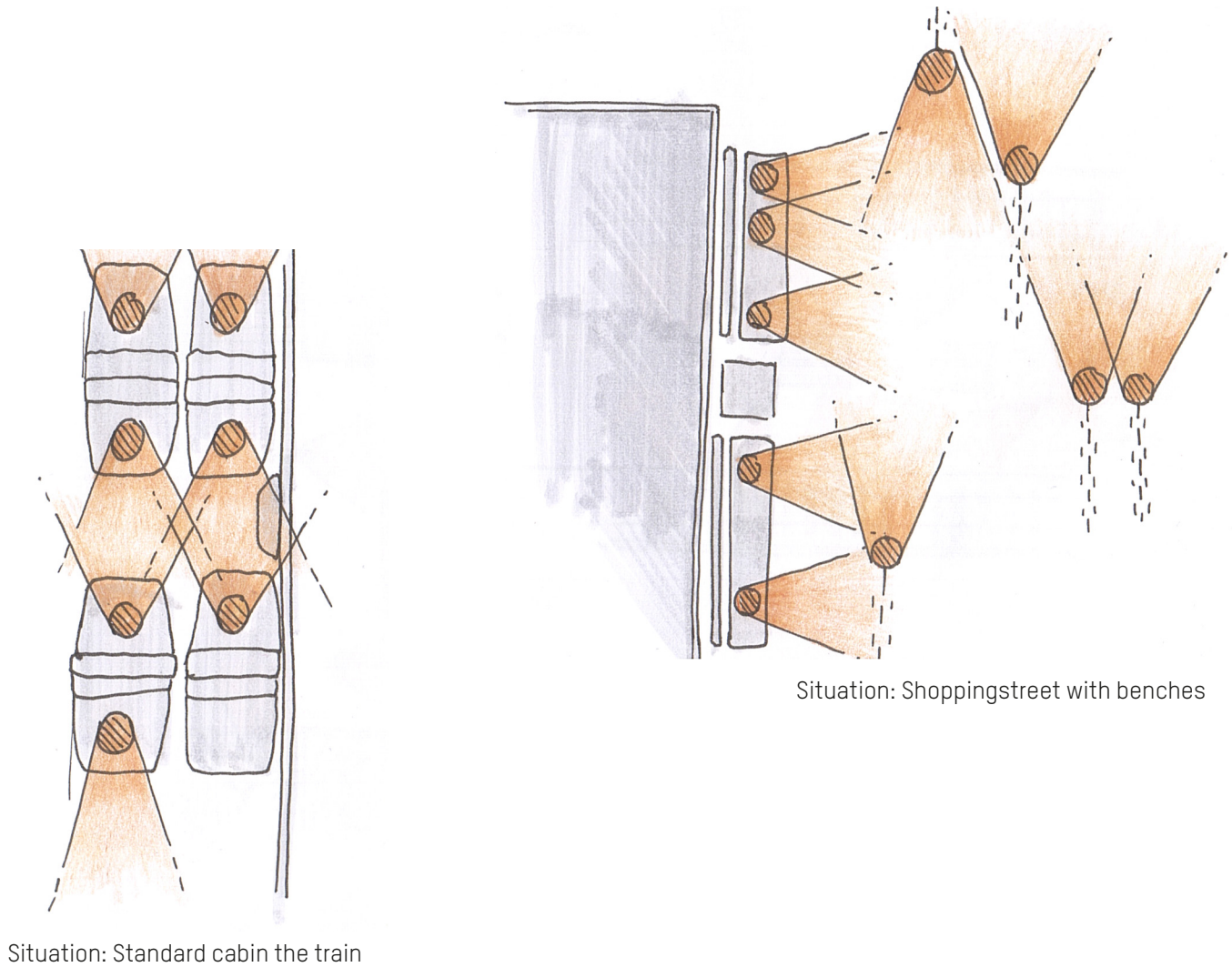
Situation: open cabin inside the train



Situation: Train Station Tracks

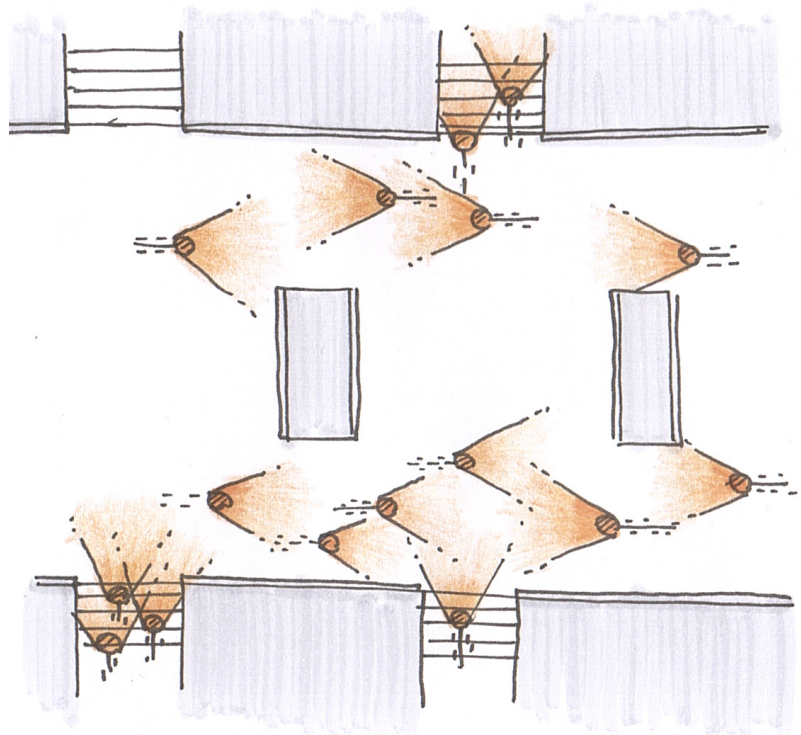


Situation: Meeting-point at Zurich trainstation



Situation: Shoppingstreet with benches

Situation: Standard cabin the train



Situation: Train-station passage

**INQUIRY METHOD**

I decided to answer the questions by making open interviews with as many people as possible. Loneliness in the crowd is a very personal, individual and emotional topic. Making open interviews gives me the opportunity to group and analyse the answers in an appropriate way. Making questionnaires and statistics, for example, would not have lead to the personal and individual opinions I need for my work.

By talking to friends and people from school I gathered a lot of different opinions about the topic already. To get a even broader range and more extreme opinions, I interviewed strangers in public space and the train. I mostly used pen and paper to make notes during or after the interviews. To make the interviewee feel more comfortable I picked people that were sitting alone in their cabin, this would create some sort of privacy. In order not to influence the persons answers, I made hidden audio recordings while talking to them. The recordings are only made to remember the transcribe the interview afterwards. Everything stays completely anonymous and the files will be deleted after transcription. To get a variety of opinions I looked for people with different ages, styles, looks and charisma.

**OPEN INTERVIEWS WITH STRANGERS**

I choose people that were sitting alone in a cabin to make them talk more freely and not feeling disturbed by others listening to our conversation. I tried to ask as many open questions as possible, and not to control the flow of the conversation too much. The interviews usually lasted between two and ten minutes.

While making these interviews I was faced to problem of overcoming oneself to start a conversation with a stranger myself. Even if I had a clear intention and reason that everyone would understand, it still took me so much effort to make the final step and ask them for an interview. But with every interview you get more confident in starting to talk to stranger, it really was a good personal experience which I think brought me closer the topic itself.

**Questions**

- How do you usually spend your time in the Train?
- Do you often get in touch with strangers in the Train?
- Please describe these situations.
- Under what circumstances do you start a conversation with a stranger?
- In your opinion, what are the obstacles of starting to talk to a stranger in the Train?
- Would you appreciate to have more conversations with strangers in the train?
- Were there situations where you felt lonely in a crowd?
- Please describe these situations.



Interviews

sex	age	opinion / position
f	~80	Only uses the train for short distances, and therefor never had a conversation to a complete stranger so far. She enjoys watching the landscape while in the train. She likes talking in the train, but only to people she already knows.
f	~70	Takes the train very seldom but is open for discussions with strangers. Despite she did get in contact with strangers she couldn't think of a particular story to tell me about.
f	~45	She is not using the train on a daily basis, but likes to use it in her free time. Usually she brings a book or music along. From time to time she gets in contact with strangers in the train. She immediately started talking about situations where children in the train establish the first contact, because they are curious and not scared of the people. Through the children you get to know their parents and start talking to them as well. In her opinion people in Switzerland should talk more to each other in trains, they seem to be very inhibited all the time. The problem, she says, of people acting so private and distant lies in the Swiss culture. But she is confident of the new Swiss generation changing this in the future.
f	~75	Likes taking public transportation a lot. The beautiful scenery of Switzerland makes her happy, but she also appreciates it if she gets to know new people in the train. She told me that in summer people are much more open for discussions than in wintertime. Once she had a conversation with a tourist from Texas, and they started talking to each other because they were both very impressed by the beautiful scenery on their way to Lucern. And just as the person before she mentioned children that start talking to you in the train. And also other elderly people that feel lonely and want to have a conversation in the train.
f	~40	When she is not with her children, she always brings a book along. Because she has children in the age of five and seven, she gets to know strangers while travelling in the train a lot. The kids are just so curious about everything and everyone they don't know, she says.
f	~45	Businesswoman that uses the train everyday to go to work. She likes the privacy in the train and usually has a book with her when in the train. If not she enjoys watching the landscape passing by. It's not that she dislikes having conversations with strangers, she is just not actively looking for it. In her opinion people travelling at rush-hours are just too tired to talk, it's not a matter of their interest in communicating. Therefor she rarely gets in contact with strangers in the train.

m	~20	Has never thought about the topic of actively communicating with strangers in the train, but thinks it's a very interesting thought. He mentioned a situation where someone sits close to you, and you hope he doesn't start talking to you. Just because he looks unappealing to you in some way. On the other hand side, there are situations where he would like to get in contact with someone but is unable to think of a clever way of doing so. He remembered a story where a guy once started talking to him, because he liked his jacket's material and tried to find out where he bought it.
m	~30	He very seldom had contact with a stranger in the train and thinks this is because he is not using the train at rush hours and mostly sits alone in his cabin. In addition he mostly has something to read or music with him in the train. He never had the feeling of being alone in the crowd while in the train.
f	~45	Despite she seemed very reserved from her look, she was very talkative and open minded in my opinion. She felt honored that I choose her for the interview. It depends on her current mood if she is interested in making contact with strangers or not. It happened that familiar strangers started talking to her. These are people you see often because you are on the same train everyday or similar, but don't know anything about them. She also said, that she is too busy to just look out of the window or at the people around her while in the train.
f	~20	She usually does her homework in the train. But is basically open for making contact with strangers. Mostly she doesn't have the courage to start a conversation herself. She couldn't of any particular story where she had contact with a stranger in the train, but there were some.
m	~80	He never had a conversation with a stranger in the train, and is totally not interested in getting to know anyone in the train. He has enough friends in his private life to talk to. He generally doesn't trust strangers that start talking to him, especially young people (I was lucky). This is because he has made some bad experiences with young people harassing him. This is also why he is not using public transportation after 10pm.
f	~22	She spends a lot of time in the train because she needs to go to the city everyday for her studies. Usually she brings her music player along and just watches the landscape, this gets her into a good mood for the day. Doing homework is not really an option because she doesn't feel comfy with so many other people around her. In general she would appreciate if people in the train would communicate more often to each other. She's open minded and interested in other people's opinions.
m	~25	He using the train everyday to go to university. And he always keeps himself busy while in the train with different things like homework, books, music or the newspaper. He never just sits there and doesn't do anything. He just helped an elderly woman to carry her heavy luggage before he got onto the train. But besides helping he seldom has contact with strangers in the train. He would only be interested in more conversations if they are in some way meaningful and enriching.

STORIES OF FEELING CONNECTED

In order to be able to manipulate or create a artificial connection between people I need to understand when and why people feel connected to someone or something. The following events are collected from friends and myself. They all tell stories where we felt a strong connection in our lives. The aim is to find reasons why and when these strong feelings of a connection evolve. The names of the tellers have been removed in the final document for privacy reasons.

Travelling with a friend

Situation/Story: While travelling in Indie we used public transportation a lot, especially trains. Trains in India are pretty creepy and generally in a bad condition. But we discovered it to be the most efficient and most beautiful way to travel. We spent so many hours standing at the open door and watching the stunning landscape. And as you ride the train you get in contact with locals very easily.

Feeling connected: I often felt very connected to fellow-traveller, while standing together at the open train door, quietly watching the landscape passing by and having all these powerful impressions of this unknown country.

What made it possible: On reason for sure is that we both come from the same place, speak the same language, grew up together and in his case even are from the same family. So we already have a lot in common that connects us.

But there is more to this, he’s the only one who knows exactly what I was feeling because he saw the same things, talked to the same people and probably felt the same himself.

Conclusion / Qualities: In my opinion this moment of connection was about *feeling the things we have in common* without talking about it. Being *far away from home*, but having someone you can *trust* by your side. What remains after being back in my country, is a friend who I can *share a certain experience* with.



At the home-party

Situation/Story: We used to live on the top floor of a brothel in the center of the city. It was two apartments and eight people. After convincing the landlord to rent the, so far unused, cellar to us, we started to make home parties each an every month. Together with friends, and friends of friends we could managed to get all the necessary equipment and attract a lot of people from all over the city. Each time there was a bar, bands and DJs. It was a big success.

Feeling connected: Whenever I was in the middle of the crowd, the music was pumping, everyone dancing and enjoying the evening, there was this strong feeling that we’re all connected.

What made it possible: Yes there was a little alcohol involved as well, but the main reason for feeling as part of that whole crowd was that everyone had fun, all my friends were around and all of them were dancing to the music. The music may has played an important role as well. Good music can make me feel deliriously happy with everything and everyone. Last but not least, the knowledge that we were able to set up all this, is very satisfying too.

Conclusion / Qualities: Music can change the mood of a person in a very short time and if someone else is enjoying the same music, it probably means he has a *similar taste of music* and therefore you feel connected. And it’s about *having fun together*. While dancing in this crowd everyone seems to become a good friend, but the next morning you realize that everything goes back to normal. The connection you had to everyone is somehow of non-binding and only lasts for a couple of hours. What stays is a memory of a beautiful evening.





### Enjoying the sunset after a long day

Situation/Story: After having traveled for two months on my own and having collected all these positive experiences, I came across this beautiful spot on the beach. That day I already made a couple of hours of car driving. It was about six o'clock in the evening and I decided to pull over and stay at the beach for a while.

Feeling connected: I ended up sitting there for about three hours, just watching the landscape and the people who were about to leave, to go back home. I didn't really talk to anyone, but somehow I did not feel alone at all, I was very happy with how things went so far. It felt too me like I'd understand everything at this very moment.

What made it possible: Traveling by yourself has the big advantage that you are completely free, you don't have to justify any of your decisions to anyone. If you don't like a spot you just leave and vice versa. At this moment I was completely aware of this and really appreciated it. And the *anticipation* of another two months of unpredictable adventures put a smile on my face.

Conclusion / Qualities: I remember this evening as a moment where I was *in peace with myself* and the world. I felt a positive connection to everyone around me. But somehow it is a very selfish experience too.



### In bed with a stranger

Situation/Story: After a long Saturday night out, I went home with a girl I met at a party. We did not wake up until the early afternoon. It was cold and rainy outside, just a perfect day to stay in bed. But we still were strangers to each other even if she slept over at my place. But we both seemed not to care about that and just stayed together until the sun set again.

Feeling connected: This feeling of lying in the bed the whole day long and acting as if it was always like this was pretty strange for a second, but then I just stopped thinking about it. It felt like we have known us for a long time. But we both knew that this is going to be one-time thing.

What made it possible: Well if it was a beautiful, hot and sunny day it probably wouldn't have turned out like this. So the *weather* was important at that moment. We both had no appointments or any other commitments this day, so there was no reason to hurry up we both had enough *time to waste*. And for sure there was the thirst for tenderness in both of us.

Conclusion / Qualities: It's this *non-binding* connection that made this moment special in my opinion. It felt like a temporary relationship. And both of us were just selfish in a good way, we were somehow just *satisfying our own needs*.

### A peaceful last day

Situation/Story: Last summer me and my roommate made a road trip through Eastern Europe. We started in Zurich and went through 13 different countries in about four weeks. When ever we were in the countryside we slept in the small car or on campgrounds. In the cities we preferred to stay in youth hostels or any other cheap hotel we could find. On our way back to Zurich we decided to take a detour through the Swiss national park, stay for a night and go hiking the next before driving back home.

Feeling connected: We both had a very good sleep in the chalet-style youth hostel up in the mountains and the sunny weather the next morning promised a beautiful day. We hiked for about four hours in the beautiful scenery of the Swiss national park. The feeling of being home very soon made me sad and happy at the same time. But it looked to me like both of us decided not to think about it, but enjoy the beauty of the country while lying in the grass and being surrounded by butterflies.

What made it possible: Being exhausted from a long and demanding trip, we both enjoyed just doing nothing and thinking about all the beautiful places and people we met. We both quietly reviewed the last four weeks without talking about it. I was really happy to have someone with me who knows what I'm thinking about.

Conclusion / Qualities: It was a moment where we could cool down and rethink everything we experienced in the last weeks. Having a good friend to share such an *strong experience* with is very valuable and somehow *irreplaceable*. As feels like there is a picture in our minds that only the two of us can see and understand.



### A stranger at the party

Situation/Story: After the final exams of my apprenticeship, some people organized a big home party for everyone who finished the exams in the region. There were only two people from my class attending the party, besides them I didn't know anyone. Suddenly this guy showed up and started talking to me, he seemed very nice. The chat turned into a pretty personal discussion after a short time.

Feeling connected: An hour later we were totally absorbed by each other and the party became totally irrelevant. We separated us by going out to the garden. We talked the night away, and when the sun rose we were still sitting there and talking.

What made it possible: We both *felt relieved* because we finished our exams. We shared the experience of being under pressure for a long time and finally being free again. In addition to this we had many other personal *things in common*, like the *music taste* or the general *attitude towards life*.

Conclusion / Qualities: Four years have passed since this evening, and I haven't talked to the guy ever again. I see him like once a year at the train station but we just smile and say hello, that's it. I think both of us want to *keep this moment a special one* and are scared of spoiling this precious memory by small talk.

### Summary

The different stories are somehow hard to compare to each other, they are all based on very personal and emotional experiences. But some aspects appear in many stories and therefor seem to be an important part of feeling a strong connection to something or someone.

The feeling can emerge even if you are in a bad mood, more important than the mood is the feeling of having something in-common and not feeling alone. If you can share a certain experience with a friend or stranger you feel connected very easily. The things you can have in-common can range from very banal things like watching a football game together to very personal and long-lasting things like being siblings.

A strong connection can even occur in very extreme situations. If, for example, you are lost in the forest with a friend and can't find a way out. Other aspects I highlighted in the stories, like music, drugs, happiness or the weather are pieces that intensify the whole experience of feeling connected.

## INQUIRY CONCLUSION

The conclusion is based on all the open interviews and conversation I had over the last weeks. The stories of feeling a strong connection are an essential part of the conclusion itself. First and foremost it is a personal interpretation of the information I collected, saw, heard and experiences in this time.

### Motivation

Why and how to start a conversation in public, is a very essential question. Only if I understand the different motivations behind the demand for communication, I can simulate a environment that connects people to each other. In this chapter I cover different reasons of what makes strangers talk to each other in public today.

Common interests: Having things in common makes people feel connected, and will lower the barriers of starting a conversation. As soon as there is a specific topic you can talk about, you don't need to be worried about an awkward, non-sens chat.

If for example you listen to a conversation of two persons talking about the recent public votes in your city and you really feel like taking part in the discussion, it is very easy and mostly accepted that you give your personal opinion as well. But the interests are not only visible through speech, but also through the look of the person. For example if the person is carrying a snowboard, wearing outdoor clothes and the train is heading to the mountains it is obvious that he's goes snowboarding.

A feeling of having something in common can also appear when experiencing something together. If for example the train suddenly stops and nobody knows what's going on this can be the trigger to start a conversation with a stranger.

Curiosity: People are curious by nature. If you see something that is of interest, you'll try to find out the more about it. For example if someone is using a electrical device you haven't seen or heard of, you probably start asking questions about it or at least take a closer look without the owner noticing it. Here also the curiosity can arise by listening to a conversation and the wish to find out more about it.

Making a compliment to a stranger in public space is not very common in Switzerland. People tend to keep this comments for themselves. But sometimes it does happen here too. For example compliments can be about the clothes the person is wearing, about the good manners or about something just mentioned in a discussion with someone else.

Children often start talking to strangers because they are very curious about everything and everyone. The good thing about children is that they're not scared of asking questions to strangers, they just start to talk when ever they feel like doing so.

Helping: Helping people is always something you can be proud of and makes you feel good afterwards. And there’s always the thought, that maybe someday you will be happy to have someone helping you too. But to realize that your help is needed the other person needs to call for help first or at least look like she really needs help.

This could be in a situation where you realize that a visual impaired person has problems finding the toilet or if a person is being sexually harassed by another. So here too, the necessity of you interacting with the person has to be obvious and clearly visible to you.

Sexual attraction: Finding someone else sexually appealing, is probably one of the most common reasons why people try to start a conversation and get to know each other. It seems to be a very strong motivator to overcome one’s inhibitions. But because you are interested in that specific person you start to think of ruining the whole situation with no second chance left much more. So this is where fear becomes an essential part of your decisions. The obstacles that stand in the way when trying to get in contact with someone will be discussed later.

Feeling lonely: It sometimes happens that people start talking to a stranger because they want to escape from their own loneliness. But it makes it hard to communicate in a neutral way, because if you don’t have a good topic to talk about, it immediately puts you in the situation where the other person realizes that you are lonely.

Elderly people often start conversations with strangers, because they don’t have anyone else in their private life to talk to. One interviewee in the age of 75 told me that she often meets other people in her age that are only in the train to socialize with others.

Conflict: If a person is totally ignoring social rules in public, acting very rude or is even harassing someone else, it often leads to an argument with a stranger. Anger makes people act more quickly because they suddenly feel involved into the situation and have the need to act. It is their moral courage that makes people act in these emotional situations.

Summary: In order to have a nice talk, first of all both parties have to be in the mood to communicate to each other. This may sound trivial, but if one person is not ready it is almost impossible to convince her to take part in a conversation.

As more the people expose their personal interests, opinions, personality and style to the strangers around them, as easier it becomes to react to it and get in contact. But this also requires the surrounding people to be observant, consciously watching and listening to the scenery. This behaviour will encourage people to start a conversation.

**Obstacles**

Many times there basically is a motivation of starting a conversation with a stranger. But often people fail because they can’t raise the courage to approach the stranger. For my project I have to try to clear the path from as many obstacles as possible that stand in the way of a motivated person making the final step towards the target subject.

Being turned down: No one likes to be turned down, or to fail in general in his life. Most people are scared of situations where they risk to fail or lose face in some way and therefore try to avoid them. It becomes even worse if other people are able to notice one’s failure. If you get turned down, feelings like anger and embarrassment become very strong. And it will make it even harder for the next time you would like to talk to someone.

Invading someone’s personal space: Swiss people highly value their personal space. It is considered rude if you invade someone’s personal space without any given reason. So if you start talking to someone you have to have a good reason for the person to accept you and not feeling intimidated.

Making a wrong impression: Sometimes you are too nervous or just can’t find the right words to describe your intent when talking to a stranger. This becomes especially awkward if the person totally misinterprets your goal. If for example you just tried to say something nice about someone’s shoes and the person thinks you have sexual interests. Once you lose the person’s trust it is very hard to get back into a neutral situation where you can talk in an objective and liberal way.

Being exposed: Especially in trains where it is silent, people are scared of starting a conversation with a stranger because everyone else in the close range is able to hear every single word. It gets even more embarrassing if the stranger you are trying to talk to shows no interest in having a conversation with you. You immediately start thinking about what the surrounding people might think right now.

No escape: If the situation starts to get really bad or embarrassing for you, there is no escaping in the train. You are somehow trapped in your cabin and will need to stay there until the train arrives at your desired destination. People are aware of this, and it will make them think twice if they risk getting into this situation.

Summary: It is all about overcoming the fear of starting a conversation with a stranger. Even if the person is a complete stranger, people seem to be very scared of their reaction and losing face to other strangers. As I experienced it myself while making interviews with strangers, as more you talk to strangers as less you think about all these fears, you get used to it and learn to overcome your inhibition.