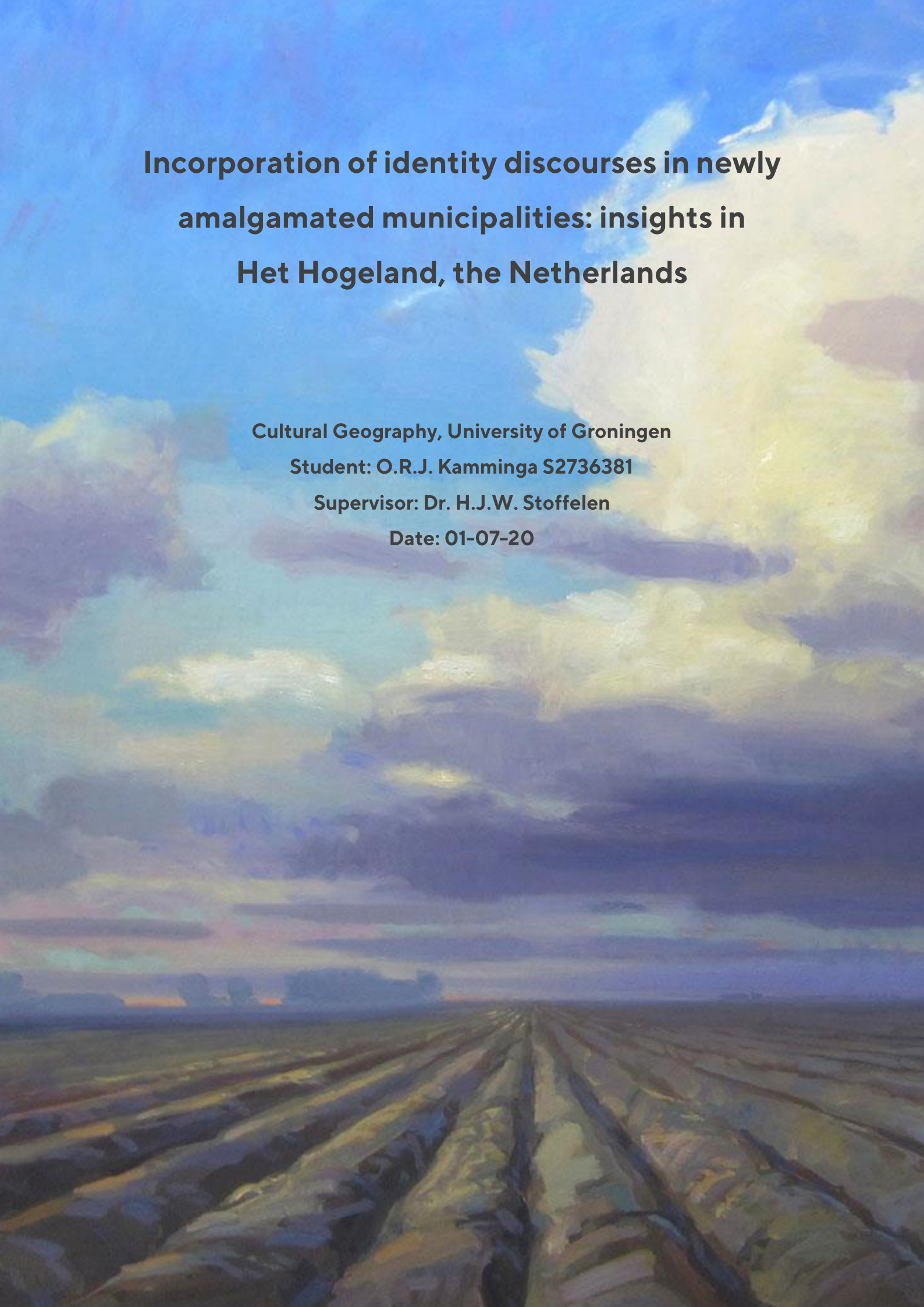

Incorporation of identity discourses in newly amalgamated municipalities: insights in Het Hogeland, the Netherlands

Cultural Geography, University of Groningen

Student: O.R.J. Kamminga S2736381

Supervisor: Dr. H.J.W. Stoffelen

Date: 01-07-20

Preface

Endless plowed farmlands, wide views and impressive skies. When growing up on the Hogeland it seemed very normal. Every day I used to cycle up and down to school, head down hurrying to be in time. Through stretched out lands on muddy roads during autumn and against unforgivingly cold winds in winter. When I got older I started to look around. Amidst these field of production there is rich history and culture. Large farmsteads which belonged to farmers richer than nobility. A humbling openness only interrupted by towering wind turbines and ancient churches. Maybe boring when you just look, but impressive when you really see. While writing this thesis I came to appreciate and enjoy the history and culture of the Hogeland even more.

Writing this thesis sometimes seemed endless, however, most of the time I found it enjoyable and rewarding to write about the region I come from. I would like to express my gratitude to several people who supported me throughout the process of writing my thesis. First of all, I would like to thank my supervisor Arie Stoffelen for guidance, support and valuable feedback. Second, I would like to thanks all the interviewees who participated in this research for their interesting stories. Next, I would also like to thank my family and friends for supporting me when necessary. My special thanks go to Evelien for always listening to me and giving me advice.

Abstract

Pressure on public services is increasing due to an ageing population and the continuing process of urbanization. Scale enlargement and redistribution of responsibilities through municipal mergers is often proposed as solution. However, municipal mergers are frequently met with resistance based on rational-economic and/or sociocultural objections. By means of a multi-staged mixed method approach this thesis studies the role of identity discourses in newly amalgamated municipalities. First, analysis of a case study in the municipality Het Hogeland show that the region is a site of collective memory. To embed to the new municipal configuration in historical and cultural narratives, rooted notions like Hogeland and Hunsingo have been actively used by the municipality. Second, incorporation of regional identity played a small yet significant role in the merger process. Active mobilization of shared cultural and historical narratives contributed to the legitimization and acceptance of the Hogeland merger. Involvement of local communities in the merger decision-making process and re-bordering of areas with mismatching identities has been instrumental in this process. Finally, the Hogeland case potentially exemplifies how municipal mergers can facilitate the construction of new meaningful regions.

Keywords: Resistance • Sticky regions • Municipal amalgamations • Regional identity • Collective memories • Regional consciousness

Contents

1. Introduction 6

2. Scale-enlargement and deinstitutionalization 9

2.1 Decentralization, legitimacy and resistance 9

3. Regional identity and sense of place 10

3.1 Defining regional identity 10

3.2 Regional consciousness vs. regional identity 12

3.3 Managing spaces: Sense of place 13

4. Linking regional identity to deinstitutionalization 15

4.1 Thick and thin identities 15

4.2 Stickiness of regions 17

4.3 Defining place-marketing as tool for promoting new identities 18

4.4 Conceptual model 20

5. Merging municipalities: Het Hogeland 22

6. Methodology 23

6.1 Research approach 23

6.1.1 Coding multidimensional and fragmented datasets 27

6.2 Research ethics 29

7. Results 29

7.1 Regional consciousness in Het Hogeland 29

7.1.1 Population composition and distribution 30

7.1.2 Associations with the Hogeland region 31

7.1.3 Characterizing landscape elements 34

7.2 From cluster cooperation to municipal amalgamation 36

7.2.1 Prelude to change 36

7.2.2 Configuration discussions: Together but in what way? 38

7.2.3 Resistance to the Hogeland merger....43
7.3 Sticky regions and rooted orientation....45
7.3.1 The stickiness of Middag-Humsterland....45
7.3.2 Collective memories and rooted regional orientation....48
7.4 Practical implementation of sociocultural narratives....51
7.4.1 Naming Het Hogeland....51
7.4.2 Selecting symbols; a new logo....56
7.4.3 Coat of Arms....62
7.4.4 Chain of office....64
7.5 Cohesion through shared connections....66
7.6 Tourism coalitions and the selection of narratives....67
8. Discussion....71
8.1 Results....71
8.2 Limitations....73
9. Conclusion and recommendations....74
9.1 Conclusion....74
9.2 Recommendations....75
Bibliography....77
Appendix 1: code grouping associations with Het Hogeland....81
Appendix 2: Provisional ''empty'' coding scheme....85
Appendix 3 Informed consent....87
Appendix 4 Reflection logo Hogeland identity....89

1. Introduction

The public sector in many Western European countries is undergoing a process of restructuring. This is due to increasing pressures on public services related to, among others, an ageing population and the continuing process of urbanization (Paasi 2012; Zimmerbauer et al., 2012). Partly because of these matters many, mainly peripheral, regions are suffering from population decline. Restructuring and redistribution of responsibilities should result in reduction of costs and relieve pressures on services provided by the central government. In case of the Netherlands, the Dutch Government formulated plans in 2012 to hand over various welfare systems from the central to the municipal level (Terlouw, 2018). These plans constituted the care for youth, elderly, chronically ill and unemployed (Rijksoverheid, 2019). This implied that the budgets of the municipalities would almost double in size (Terlouw, 2016). Since many municipalities are relatively small in terms of number of inhabitants and financial power, the central government argued that many do not have the capacity to deal with these responsibilities (Terlouw, 2016). Therefore, several small municipalities had to merge into larger administrative units, which should be better equipped to deal with increasing local-level public sector responsibilities. Inter-municipal mergers are increasingly seen in practice as the most suitable solution in terms of restructuring public services in a cost-effective manner (Zimmerbauer et al., 2012).

Municipal mergers are a widespread phenomenon, happening in various countries across the world. Amalgamations of municipalities are often based on rational aspirations of increasing economic efficiency and regional competitiveness (Zimmerbauer et al., 2012). Municipal mergers have, however, frequently been met with resistance despite pre-merger plans often promising increased economic performance and more efficient governance structures. Resistance can be the either the result of objections to the liberal nature of mergers and the enlargement of scale, or of objections that transcend socio-economic rationale (Terlouw, 2016; Zimmerbauer et al., 2012). In case of the first objection, the local population fears that scale enlargement in public services will result in bureaucracy and a decreased availability of public services. Additionally, promises of regional competitiveness and economic efficiency can possibly be interpreted by inhabitants as vague jargon from administrators, often based on unfulfilled promises from the past (Zimmerbauer et al., 2012).

Objections to municipal mergers can, secondly, be a rooted in regional identity (Terlouw, 2016; Zimmerbauer et al., 2012). Regional identity involves a cognitive and emotional relation of individuals or groups with a specific locality (Paasi, 2011). Feared loss of loss of regional identity is identified to be a dominant motive for opposing attitudes towards amalgamations (Terlouw, 2018). Terlouw's (2016) study shows, however, that collective marketing and cooperation between stakeholders from different communities are instrumental for the construction of new identities during municipal mergers (Terlouw, 2016).

In line with the argumentation presented above, it is argued by Blasco et al. (2014) that attempts at cross-border governance structures can potentially be enabled through socio-cultural similarities. The research by Stoffelen and Vanneste (2018) provides supporting evidence for this assumption. Attempts at cross-border cooperation processes in these case-studies are similar to cooperation processes between municipalities in merger contexts, showing the relevance of using these insights. Historical narratives and identity can be used as strategic policy tools to create inter-regional consciousness, which can facilitate the cross-border governance process and, thus, potentially also mergers of regions (Blasco et al., 2014; Paasi; Scott, 2013 & Zimmerbauer, 2016). Thus, taking in account identity discourses in the pre-merger situation potentially avoids resistance and stimulates cooperation between administrators. This reflects the necessity of understanding the role of local identities in municipal merger-processes.

Nevertheless, identity-discourses in municipal mergers have been relatively understudied. Most studies, like the ones described above, do not focus on how local identity is used in amalgamations, only that local identity can be a source of resistance. Moreover, research often focusses on economic and rational implications of upscaling (Terlouw, 2016). This research, similar to Terlouw (2018), focusses on the use of local identities as a basis, instead of endpoint. Using a case study of Het Hogeland (the Netherlands), this research aims to contribute to our insights on the critical, more socio-cultural processes underlying municipal amalgamation processes by tackling the following research question:

What has been the role of regional identities before and during municipal merger-processes of the municipality Het Hogeland?

This thesis will start with a theoretical discussion on deinstitutionalization and scale-enlargement, followed by a discussion on regional identity and to lesser extent sense of place. Firstly, the main reasons for territorial re-organization plans, often in the form of mergers, will be elaborated on. Secondly, the literature review will show different ways of how regional identity can be theoretically approached. After theoretically substantiating these topics they will by synthesized in the third chapter of the theoretical framework. This chapter focusses on theoretical links between institutionalization of new regions and regional identity.

The empirical research of this study will shortly elaborate on the regional identity discourse in Het Hogeland after which it focusses on how this discourse was included in policy and institutionalization. Firstly, by means of a survey the main determinants of the regional identity in the Hogeland as perceived by inhabitants will be studied, providing a general understanding of the regional identity discourse. Secondly, the evolution of the merger process will be reconstructed by identifying key-events that have shaped the Hogeland merger. Thirdly, it will be identified how sociocultural elements and shared history have been included in the plan- and decision-making process of the Hogeland merger. Fourth, the sections will be connected, resulting in a holistic representation of the regional identity discourse in the Hogeland merger. Finally, the role of regional identities in the municipal merger-processes of municipality Het Hogeland will be approached.

2. Scale-enlargement and deinstitutionalization

2.1 Decentralization, legitimacy and resistance

Decentralization of the nation-state causes a decrease in hierarchical structures and an increase in horizontal cooperation in smaller administrative units (Terlouw & van Gorp, 2014). The transfer of responsibilities and power from the national to the regional level, despite its clear line of reasoning, not an unambiguous phenomenon (Terlouw & van Gorp, 2014). It shows new forms of multilevel governance which are more negotiated between administrative units and stakeholders in comparison with hierarchical structures characterizing for the national government (Hooghe & Marks, 2003). Small-scale administrative units increasingly cooperate in new institutional arrangements often in the form of amalgamations.

Newly developed or amalgamated regions (or plans thereto) are often legitimized by stressing political and economic advantages (Rijksoverheid, 2019). New regions require a legitimate basis to prevent the undermining of democratic values. Terlouw and van Gorp (2014) discuss the theory of Beetham (1991) on legitimacy of power in relation to new regions. Beetham (1991) argues that legitimacy is based on three factors: legality, expressed consent and justifiability. Legality, firstly, refers to adherence of established legal frameworks that are made for the acquirement of power. Secondly, expressed consent of the population is linked to the acceptance of the new region by the public through elections or manifestations of mass events. Thirdly, justifiability is ‘’based on social norms concerning the source of political authority and the purpose of government’’ (Terlouw & van Gorp, 2014, p.853). State power must be acknowledged by institutions that are generally regarded to have authority. New municipalities, in this case, must serve necessary goals in management of territories but it must also serve the public interest. Serving the public interest has a strong social component. The public interest is linked to the norms, values, and the identity of a specific region (Beetham, 1991). So newly institutionalized regions need to justify new narratives by aligning them with the interests of the local population. This links decentralization to regional identity discourses. Increased economic efficiency justifies administrative restructuring but it possibly undermines the social dimensions of legitimacy.

Undermining sociocultural dimensions though prospects of economic efficiency can potentially result in resistance (Terlouw, 2018). Regional identity involves a cognitive and emotional relation of individuals or groups with a specific locality (Paasi, 2011). Feared loss of loss of regional identity is identified to be a dominant motive for opposing attitudes towards amalgamations from the local population (Terlouw, 2018). The research of Terlouw (2016) presents two cases of municipal mergers in the Netherlands to develop this argument. The first case, involving the municipal merger of Goeree-Overflakee, met resistance at first. However, this disappeared when, mainly through cooperation of local entrepreneurs, a new thinner (see 4.1) and more future oriented identity was created. General adaptation of identity narratives, according to the theory of Beetham (1991), contributes to the legitimization of newly institutionalized regions. The second case involved the municipal merger of Katwijk, an amalgamation of three municipalities in which opposing local identities increasingly became important after the merger-process. Local communities in Katwijk became more inward oriented focusing on historical roots and emphasizing the differences between communities. Administrators in Katwijk met resistance, based on socio-cultural discourses which resulted in, on one hand, complicated governance situations and, on the other hand, discontented inhabitants. However, the case of Goeree-Overflakee shows that collective marketing and cooperation between local stakeholders from different communities are instrumental for the construction legitimate administrations and new identities during municipal mergers (Terlouw, 2016).

3. Regional identity and sense of place

3.1 Defining regional identity

The previous chapter already shortly discussed regional identity in relation to municipal mergers. This section will further elaborate on the ways regional identity can be approached. Conceptualizing the region and identity is not straightforward. Both the term region and identity are complex to define. Firstly, the definition of region is plural, complex, and contextual (Paasi, 2011; Simon et al. 2010). Within the academic debate there is not a full consensus on the definition of region. Regional identity is, secondly, only thinly theorized (Paasi, 2011). This reflects why it is relevant to have a clearly formulated definition on which

this research is based. There are two more or less opposing views in discussions about regions and their relationship with identity. The first, more traditional, view is based on a more territorial notion that is based on the boundedness of regions while the second recognizes the region as a relational construct. These two approaches and will be discussed in the following sections.

Firstly, those who content the relational viewpoint and adopt a more territorial interpretation of the region, recognize the region as a bounded entity (Zimmerbauer et al., 2012). In this case regional identity is being regarded the product of path dependent configurations of culture, politics, and economics (Jones & MacLeod, 2004). This implies that this regional identity is a more fixed and stable phenomenon belong to a certain spatiality (Zimmerbauer, 2012). The boundedness of regions is evident when regional borders are in discussions about politics and identity narratives on a regional level. Regional identity narratives are perpetually being produced and reproduced accordingly to spatial boundaries (Paasi, 2011). It becomes even more evident when a region is home to a specific ethnographic community which uses the region as an important identifier.

Secondly, one of the most dominant approaches in current discussions about this topic is the relational nature of regions. Advocates of this approach conceptualize regions as networked and connected spaces where borders increasingly have a less relevant role (Paasi, 2011; Zimmerbauer et al., 2012). While the definition of the region is increasingly being recognized as contextual and flexible, regional identity implies a certain boundedness. This is because in practice regions are often used as distinctive containers for e.g. citizenship, political mobilization and cultural expression. Assuming the relational character of regions this can create conceptual confusion. Even though regions become increasingly connected and networked, ''old regionalists'' argue that relational thinkers overestimate the importance of bounded shapes of regions. The region provides the spatial context through which actors have interactions (Paasi, 2011). These regionalists argue that the bounded shape of regions partially affect these engagements. A second critique on the relational approach could be that high internal and external connectedness of regions is not self-evident. I would like to add to the discussion that some regions which are not as well integrated in global, national and

local/regional networks might not apply well to the relational approach. Conversely, well integrated regions might not apply to the notion of more territorial views on the region.

Regional identity, however, represents only one of the multiple identities of people (Paasi, 2013). Regions and places are often being regarded as containers of identity (Prokkola et al., 2015). However, this notion is increasingly being replaced by the idea that place and region are an arena for multiple identities. The latter argument does not recognize borders as exclusive differentiators but as porous lines where multiple identities overlap (Prokkola et al., 2015). Due to globalization processes people have the opportunity to identify with a myriad of objects, spatial units and cultures. But why then does the region remain an identifier? To explain this Maffesoli (1996) coined the term ''neotribalism'' to emphasis that man still has an innate need to identify with a group as opposed to individualization and cross-border cultures. The region can offer a relatively tangible group, as people from that region share the similarity of living in a region with the same characteristics.

3.2 Regional consciousness vs. regional identity

The previous section has shown that approaching regional identity theoretically is complex. In order to analyze the phenomenon, Paasi (2011) makes a conceptual distinction between identity of the region and regional consciousness. The identity of the region refers to the features of a region (i.e. nature, culture, traditions etc.) that make the region distinguishable from others. Regional consciousness is the degree to which inhabitants (or people in general) identify with the region. Classification of these concepts is sensitive, subjective and power laden. This theory offers a way of conceptualizing the nuances in regional identity without being bound to one specific region. Being generally applicable to changing regions makes it possible to compare regions for the two categories.

The conceptual distinction that Paasi (2011) makes, provides a useful approach to study the complex concept of regional identity. This distinction will be applied in this study by comparing the regional consciousness of inhabitants with identity of the region as defined by experts. Even though, understanding the relation of individuals with regions can be a goal on its own, this research aims to reflect on this place-relation in the context of municipal mergers.

Williams and Stewart (1998) offer valuable insights in the matter of place-relation in resource-management which translates well to the use of identity in merger contexts. They stress the relevance of considering emotive relations with place in ecosystem management. Additionally, they provide practical recommendations for experts to avoid political conflicts by including sense of place. This is useful for the context of municipal mergers as it offers examples of ''good practice'' in avoiding local resistance by incorporating place-relations.

3.3 Managing spaces: Sense of place

Sense of place is an interesting concept for the discussion on the use of regional identities in regional management because it explains the emotive relation of people with places and arguably also regions. The concept of sense of place has been theorized thoroughly in varying contexts. Sense of place is an overarching concept that describes the relationships between humans and localities (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2011). The concept is based on the notion that individuals and groups attach meaning to spaces. One influential thinker in sense of place theory Tuan (1975, p.152) describes place as ''center of meaning constructed by experience''. Endowed with meaning, place is thus more than spatial coordinates or a point in space. Important for this discussion is the idea that place in itself cannot hold meaning. Sense of place is subjective interpretation of spaces and, therefore, resides within human actors. This has common ground with Paasi's (2011) concept of regional consciousness of inhabitants. Although simplified, it is possible to compare place, seen as space endowed with meaning, with the regional consciousness. Regional consciousness and place both encompass the emotive and cognitive bonds with localities, embedding sense of place in regional identity theory.

Place remains an important identifier for people despite increasingly fuzzy boundaries and globalizing networks (Harvey, 1996; Maffesoli, 1996). Williams and Stewart (1998) argue that when new land uses are being introduced, they can become symbols of external threats to sense of place of local actors. Which illustrates that the differences in subjective place meanings can be a source of conflict. This form of external threat to local actors can be compared to the introduction deinstitutionalization measures in regional contexts. Potential conflicts reflect not only the sense of place of the outsider but also the power of external actors over the local (Williams & Stewart, 1998). In region-building processes, not much

attention has been given to power dynamics (Paasi, 2011). In the case of plans for municipal mergers, power dynamics are evident as policy issued by governments leads to territorial reorganization. This does not necessarily correspond with the sense of place of local actors.

Williams and Stewart (1998) argue that in order to avoid conflict in ecosystem management, and arguably also in managing municipal mergers, the relationship between people and place needs to be considered. This relation should have a key role in the management of territorial reorganization and not only serve as interesting background information (William & Stewart, 1998). Incorporating sense of place in the process can enable managers, politicians and experts to find common ground. Competing senses of place need to be negotiated, ultimately resulting in a future shared notion of sense of place. A shared sense of place or common understanding of regional identity discourses enables not only the management of territorial reorganization, but it can also become a basis for economic competitiveness (Paasi, 2011). Rural spaces, like municipality Het Hogeland, increasingly move away from agricultural production by incorporating additional sources of employment, a process identified in most rural places of Europe in recent decades (Saxena et al., 2008). In order to provide sustainable sources of income, new socio-economic activities, such as tourism and leisure, should be rooted in existing social, economic and cultural structures (Saxena et al., 2008), making a focus on territorial cohesion and socio-cultural legitimacy of administrative areas very relevant (see section 4.3). Therefore, sense of place and sociocultural connections need to be considered in institutionalization processes.

Williams and Stewart (1998) propose several practical recommendations for applying sense of place in ecosystem management. Because of similar contexts these recommendations potentially also illustrate the relevance of taking in account emotive relations with place in municipal mergers. Firstly, the authors stress the relevance of knowing and using common or traditional place-names. Doing this reflects that managers respect the ties people have with places. This recommendation also applies to amalgamations of new municipalities as illustrated by the research of Zimmerbauer et al. (2017). These authors describe a case in Finland where the merger process was strongly resisted. The administration of that region changed the municipality's name, which resulted in opposition and irritation among one of the groups living in the region. Therefore, policymakers and government officials need to

carefully consider names in institutionalization processes. Conflict can possibly be avoided by using traditional and common place names which are rooted in local history. Secondly, Williams and Stewart (1998) stress that managers need to understand the politics of places that are proposed to go through change. Places can have cultural (i.e. traditional, symbolic, historical, spiritual), social or economic values which can have meanings for individuals and/or groups. Understanding the politics behind these values prevents managers to make uninformed decisions. This is especially relevant when places have special but different meanings to different groups (Williams & Stewart, 1998). Thirdly, managers need to consider differing local interest. Some places have different overlapping meanings for different groups and people. This makes management of places sensitive and influenced by power structures. Understanding these local interests in places can help in the mediation of possible conflicts and discussions (Williams &Stewart, 1998).

4. Linking regional identity to deinstitutionalization

4.1 Thick and thin identities

This chapter will elaborate on theoretical links between institutionalization of new regions and regional identity. Regions are growing in political importance and even though they remain relevant as containers of collective identity (Harvey, 1996; Maffesoli, 1996), Terlouw (2012) argues that processes globalization of and individualization undermine traditional identities. This contradiction can be theoretically approached. Arguing in line with the relation approach, Terlouw (2012) stresses the importance of intensifying connected networks which result in ''thinner'' identities. State organizations and administrative borders increasingly transform, take for example mergers of new municipalities, which puts pressure on existing regional identities. Terlouw (2009) has proposed the concept of thick and thin identities in order to distinguish between different aspects of regional identities. This conceptually brings together the two approaches on regional identity.

Thick regional identities are embedded in traditional, socio-cultural and economic characteristics. Thin identities mainly focus on economic characteristics and are future-oriented (Prokkola et al., 2015; Terlouw, 2012). Identity discourses in a given region will always be a hybrid between thick and thin identities, however not always balanced. The identity of

new regions is constructed from multiple existing identities and systems (Terlouw & van Gorp, 2014). The authors argue that new regional identities are layered and that identity determinants can be selected by institutions, politicians and administrators from thick and thin identities that are in place (Terlouw, 2012). They use the terms 'downloading' and 'uploading' to exemplify the construction of a new identity by using respectively existing large collective narratives and expanding future oriented goals (Terlouw & van Gorp, 2014). Those who are involved in the process of creating new identities choose to implement narratives from traditional thick identities to embed the new identity in the region. This implies that they also actively leave out other narratives that do not correspond with the proposed identity. Uploading refers to elements that are used as narrative for the course the region would like to take in the future (Terlouw & van Gorp, 2014). New narratives are not selected by one individual or institution. The selection of narratives from thin and thick identities that are in place is a negotiation between stakeholders and administrations with different positions of power, although abstracted in theory, it helps to understand these complex phenomena.

An example discussed by Terlouw and van Gorp (2014) can make these abstractions more tangible. The Bollenstreek in the Randstad in the Netherlands is used as an example where thick and thin identities are effectively used in conjunction with each other. The region uses its strong regional identity as center for the tulip bulb industry to position itself towards other networks (downloading). The region still offers specialized services for the production and marketing of this specific industry (uploading). The Bollenstreek as region has a thick identity referring embedded in traditional narratives while the Bollenstreek network has a thin regional identity with an emphasis on connectedness and economic efficiency (Terlouw & van Gorp, 2014). These identities reinforce each other in the advantage of the region as a whole. This example additionally shows the dichotomy between the old regionalist and relational perspective on regional identity. It can be argued that traditional Bollenstreek narrative is in line with the regionalist perspective, showing why regions still are relevant as containers of identity. The thin identity of the Bollenstreek network, however, shows that networks have become instrumental for future oriented development. This implies that there is a mutual dependence between thick and thin identities (Terlouw & van Gorp, 2014).

4.2 Stickiness of regions

The conceptual distinction between thick and thin identities is mainly focused on those who negotiate the narratives of regions. Construction of new regions and narratives, however, has influence on the inhabitants and people that have ties with the region. Regional consciousness does not disappear after a region goes through the process of deinstitutionalization (Zimmerbauer et al., 2017). Zimmerbauer et al. (2017) claim that after a region loses its legitimate status, regional consciousness remains to a certain degree due to its ''stickiness''. In this sense deinstitutionalization is never complete and thus in a state of betweenness. This also explains why the relation between deinstitutionalization and regional identity can be contested (Zimmerbauer et al., 2017). Zimmerbauer et al. (2017) adopts the viewpoint that regions emerge from performative action and path dependency in the political arena.

The research by Zimmerbauer et al. (2017) shows that when administrative borders are removed, it does not directly imply that regions turn into open, integrated wholes. Inhabitants of regions that are in the process of deinstitutionalization, a process that according to Zimmerbauer et al. (2017) never reaches a state of completion, continue to have ties with often characterizing landmarks and traditions (i.e. local businesses, buildings, sports clubs). The case study by Zimmerbauer et al. (2017) shows that when the relation with the deinstitutionalized region and its inhabitants is threatened by the changes that come with institutionalization of a new region, inhabitants can resist the municipality merger.

To theoretically approach the stickiness of regions, Zimmerbauer et al. (2017) make the distinction between hard and soft spaces. Territorial spaces, firstly, harden over time meaning that socio-cultural and institutional configurations bound to a locality do not easily disintegrate. On that account, the collective consciousness after deinstitutionalization processes will likely still refer to and be based on these hardened spaces (Zimmerbauer et al., 2017). Secondly, soft spaces are conceptualized as new emergent spaces of governance that are based on hybrid and multi-jurisdictional governance and development processes. Although, borders remain to have significance in modern society, regions have become relatively softer over time. Because hardened territorial spaces do not easily disintegrate it cannot not be argued that soft spaces are created through deinstitutionalization

(Zimmerbauer et al., 2017). However, soft spaces can be regarded as additional layers on the existing regional structures.

The degree of stickiness is not bound to the size of regions. This depends more on the how deeply regions are embedded in regional consciousness. Therefore, I would argue that it is instrumental to understand how regions are embedded in the consciousness of inhabitants prior to deinstitutionalization of old hardened regions. Raivo (2004) gives an additional reason for understanding historical and identity narratives related space. He states that sites of collective memory can ''offer prospects of fruitful co-operation at the level of both intergovernmental agreements and concrete local joint action'' (Raivo 2004, p. 71). This is substantiated by the research of Stoffelen and Vanneste (2018) who argue that cross-border cooperation can be facilitated through shared historical narratives in a tourism context. Additionally, re-telling and symbolizing historical regional narratives can enable cross-border cooperation, and arguably also on municipal level (Scott, 2013). The results will show whether the mobilization of the regional Hogeland narrative enabled cooperation during the merger period.

4.3 Defining place-marketing as tool for promoting new identities

The research by Terlouw and van Gorp (2014) shows that the selection of thick and thin regional identity narratives mainly is done through governments and key figures in municipal mergers. This is supported by the research of Metzger (2013) which emphasizes that institutionalization is enabled through actors who are legitimized and have the capacity to act as the voice of the region. Communication of new narratives by these key persons and organizations is thus instrumental for institutionalization of regions.

Promotion of identities is often done through place promotion, place marketing and place branding. Boisen et al. (2018) clearly distinguish between these concepts which enables systematic analysis and avoids conceptual confusion. Firstly, place promotion is the least encompassing of the three concepts. It is used to promote region for target audiences (mainly visitors). Promotion is a short-term strategy which focus on what a place has to offer. Secondly, place marketing is related to the managing of supply and demand by targeting specific market segments (Boisen et al., 2018). This requires a more long-term strategy in

comparison to place promotion. Place-branding is, thirdly, aimed at reputation-management and image creation. By doing this, branding can significantly influence how place is being perceived (Govers & Go, 2009), making it relevant to use the concept in relation to socio-cultural legitimacy of newly amalgamated municipalities. The framework by Boisen et al. (2018) shows that the place- promotion, marketing and branding predominantly focus on three separate sectors, namely visitors, businesses and inhabitants respectively.

Place branding has an emphasis on influencing attitudes of inhabitants (Boisen et al., 2018). As mentioned before, regional identities are the product of path dependent configurations of culture, politics, and economics (Jones & MacLeod, 2004). Place branding should, therefore, be identity driven in order to influence identity discourses. Administrators can potentially use branding as a tool to create ‘’thinner’’ identities by grounding them on more traditional ‘’thicker’’ narratives which have hardened over time. Branding, opposed to place promotion and place marketing, focusses on influencing identity discourses among inhabitants, making it a useful conceptualization to analyze policy-measures aimed at identity creation in the Hogeland municipality.

4.4 Conceptual model

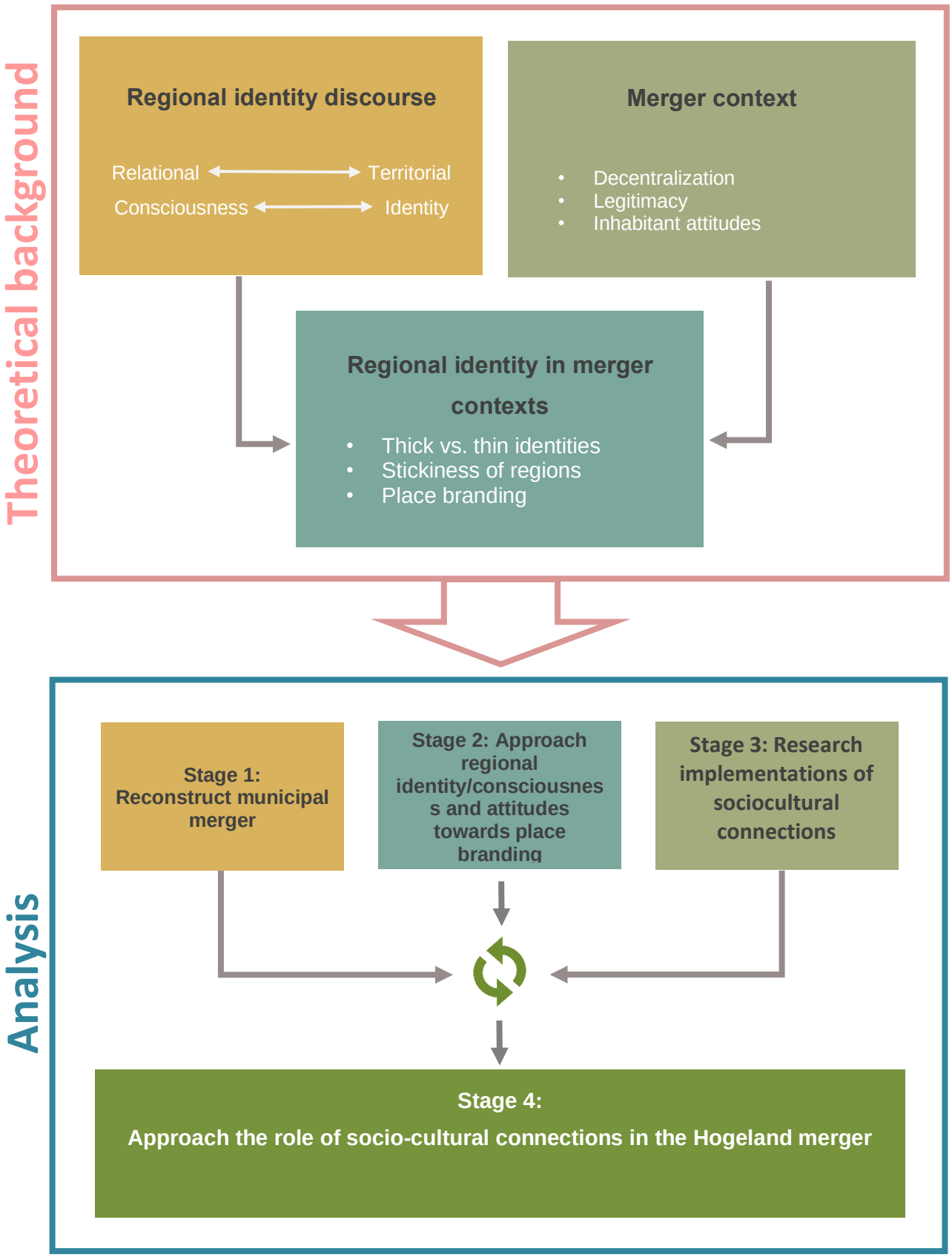

Fig. 1 Conceptual model showing how the theoretical background serves the analysis of socio-cultural connections and the merger context.

A conceptual model been designed (Fig. 1) in which the theoretical background and its relation to the analysis is visualized. The theoretical background has brought together literature on municipal mergers and regional identity discourse. Enabling a better understanding of mobilization of identity in merger contexts. The multi-staged analysis taps into different parts of the theoretical background but also aims to find links in the literature. The final stage of the analysis will ultimately result in a coherent assessment of the role regional identity discourse in the Hogeland merger.

5. Merging municipalities: Het Hogeland

Municipality Het Hogeland in the north of the province of Groningen, the Netherlands is the study area of this research. Het Hogeland came into existence on January the first of 2019 following a merger of the previous municipalities of Eemsmond, Winsum, Bedum and De Marne. The name Hogeland refers to the region with relatively recent sea-clay deposits. Geomorphological and sociocultural definitions of the region are interesting in the case of the Hogeland. The region is relatively high in relation to the surrounding land and the sea-level. Beside the geomorphological origin, the Hogeland name is also a historical narrative. The name is commonly used in local communities. The new municipality is thus named after this historical and geomorphological region. Selecting this name has been an active choice which has been based on polls in the former municipalities. The geomorphological Hogeland region does, however, not correspond fully with the municipality borders. The selection of this historical narrative might have had consequences in the form of either resistance or cooperation from specific groups of inhabitants, depending on the sense of place of inhabitants.

Due to path dependency and different historical backgrounds, the perceived regional identity might vary within the former municipalities. The research of Zimmerbauer et al. (2017) shows that newly institutionalized regions need to resonate with the identity determinants from all former municipalities in order to avoid resistance. Exploring regional identity discourses in the merger process of the Hogeland reflects the relevance of selecting this case as an example. Additionally, exploring the role of identity in the Hogeland case will deepen our understanding about this relatively understudied phenomenon. This research specifically aims to assess the role of regional identity in the Hogeland merger by researching how policymakers, experts and politicians have incorporated socio-cultural connections in relation to the merger.

The region of the former municipalities is mainly rural with several larger towns. Bedum, the largest, has approximately 8.000 inhabitants followed by Winsum and Uithuizen (CBS, 2019). The most populous settlements used to be the location of the town halls of the former municipalities. Currently they are still in use as town hall but in service of the new municipality which is officially located in Uithuizen. Agriculture is, historically, embedded in all the

economies of the former municipalities (Zienswijze op herindelingsadvies, 2017). However, as mentioned, rural spaces increasingly move away from agricultural production by incorporating additional sources of income, a process identified in most rural places of Europe in recent decades (Saxena et al., 2008). The regional identity of the Hogeland has been influenced by existing and new narratives. Incorporation of new sources of income that are based in socio-cultural and historical elements can possibly be enabled through understanding how identity has been shaped and used in the merger-process which can help to solidify the economic competitiveness of the region.

Potential alignment of ideals, motivations and narratives have been a result of cross-border cooperation between multiple stakeholders from a variety of former municipalities. Reconstructing the cooperation-process and the implementation of sociocultural markers will deepen our understanding about the role of regional identity in merger contexts.

6. Methodology

6.1 Research approach

The Hogeland region provides an interesting setting to study how municipalities integrate socio-cultural and historical connections in municipal merger contexts. A case study is suitable in the research context since regions are spatially and historically contingent, thus empirical understanding of this phenomenon should be based on context in order to avoid abstract, empty generalizations (Paasi, 2011). Discussions about the precise course of the merger process and, subsequently, the selection of historical narratives have had a considerable amount of media attention before the merger. Empirical research has provided insight in the role of socio-cultural markers and historical narratives by analyzing how key-actors concretely operationalized this.

Considering the aim to explore the role of regional identities during and before municipal merger-processes I have opted for a mixed methods research approach. This section identifies the different research methods used for the different subjects and the corresponding stakeholders. To explore the role of regional identity in the merger context, two aspects will be central in the research: the regional identity discourse in place and the practical

implementation of shared sociocultural connections. It will be approached through a multi-staged method, which will ultimately create a coherent overview of the role of identity discourse in the Hogeland merger. This multi-staged approach is based on Stoffelen and Vanneste (2018) and is selected because their research shows that it accounts for the integration of different stakeholder perspectives on socio-cultural connections, making it a relevant approach to study the selected case.

In the first stage of the analysis, the research explores the opinion of inhabitants on the marketing of the Hogeland by analyzing a survey set out by Stoffelen et al. (2020). The aim of this survey was to spatially explore regional identity determinants as perceived by inhabitants of the Hogeland and to investigate regional consciousness. The survey was distributed among high school students and their families in the Hogeland region. The distributing was coordinated by one of the authors of research (Stoffelen et al., 2020). In total 163 valid surveys were filled out by respondents. For this research, descriptive statistics were collected and analyzed using SPSS. This provided insight in general perspectives on socio-cultural determinants, enabling the researcher to determine key determinant for the regional identity as perceived by inhabitants.

Inhabitants were asked in the survey to name four words which they associate with the Hogeland. Analysis of associations was done by analyzing and coding them with Atlas.TI, similar to the approach of Hoving (2010). Adopting a similar approach as Hoving (2010) proved to be favorable for the comparability of the research. It enabled the researcher to determine whether regional consciousness discourses in the Hogeland region have changed compared to 2010. It must be noted, however, that the research of Hoving (2010) only encompassed the former municipality of Eemsmond, which might explain possible differences in outcome.

The codes that have been used to categorize the associations are subjective and based on themes that are frequently mentioned in the survey. In total 646 associations were mentioned and coded. The associations and their corresponding codes can be viewed in appendix 1. The researcher has opted to contribute only one code to each association, because most of the codes proved to be relatively unambiguous.

The survey additionally asked about personal opinions related to the marketing of the new municipality. This section of the survey links the survey on regional consciousness to the to the central question of this thesis. The survey contains several questions on the new municipality logo and how this correspond with their regional consciousness. The logo depicts images that generally are regarded as characteristic for the region. Symbolization through a new logo can be a source of identification for people (Zimmerbauer et al., 2012). The survey results be used to assess whether this also the case for Het Hogeland. Furthermore, the results have been used in in the last stage by linking back the insights from semi-structured interviews.

In the second stage of the analysis the evolution of the Hogeland merger was reconstructed, providing context about key-events which are necessary to understand the role of identity-narratives in the merger-process. This was based on a content analysis of policy documents, combined with insights from interviews with experts and policymakers.

In the third stage it was elaborated on how administrators and experts reflected on, and potentially incorporated socio-cultural connections in the merger process. This stage has a focus on the decision-making process within administrative discourses. In short, the interviewees have been asked to elaborate on the merger context and more explicitly about the use of sociocultural connections in the merger-process. This step enabled the researcher to determine why certain elements were chosen to be ‘’downloaded’’ and ‘’uploaded’’ (Terlouw & van Gorp, 2014) to the narrative of Het Hogeland and ultimately to determine the role of these connections.

Practically the interviewees were selected on basis of their occupation and involvement in the merger process. Snowball sampling has been used to identify possible participants. Through this type of sampling interesting new cases are identified based on the social network of participants (Stratford & Bradshaw, 2016). In total eight interviews were conducted with a varied group of respondents (Table 1). Participants were either involved in the governing process during the merger or as hired experts. Three interviews were conducted face-to-face on location, which was favorable to the establishment of rapport. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic which has limited social interactions, the remaining five interviews were

conducted through Skype (3), WhatsApp (1) and telephone (1). In order to be able to pick up on visual cues video-media like Skype and WhatsApp were selected. This proved to be a good substitute for real-life interviews as no technical limitations were experienced. One interview was conducted by telephone which implied the loss of visual cues and possibly affected the depth of conversation and establishment of rapport for that particular case. The interviews were funnel structured which implies that firstly broad questions about the merger context were asked to make the participant familiar with the subject (Dunn, 2016). Subsequently, the interview moved on to more personal views and specific information about the selected subjects. After the interviews were transcribed, they were sent back to the interviewees for participant checking, enhancing the level of trust between the researcher and interviewee (Dunn,2016). All but one interviewee consented with the provided transcript and the usage of their names in the research. One participant indicated that anonymization was preferred.

Table 1: List of participants for the qualitative part of the research

Participant	**Description**	**Data gathering**
Eltjo Dijkhuis	*Current occupation:* Alderman of municipality Het Hogeland. *Occupation in merger process:* councilor of the former municipality of Eemsmond.	face-to-face
Kristel Rutgers	*Current occupation:* alderwoman of municipality Het Hogeland. *Occupation in merger process:* councilor of the former municipality of Bedum.	Skype
Rinus Michels	mayor of the former municipality of Winsum.	Skype
Marjanne Sorgdrager	Smith and owner of ‘’Zilver is Spreken’’. Made the chain of office of Het Hogeland	face-to-face

René Blokzijl	Strategist and co-owner of strategic brand-agency *Dizain* which developed the municipality logo of Het Hogeland.	face-to-face
Elly van der Gugten	Assistant to the program manager who structured the municipal merger.	WhatsApp videocall
Jessica Hoekstra	Employee at promotion and marketing organization *Promotie Waddenland*	Skype
[anonymous respondent]	Film producer and director	telephone call

6.1.1 Coding multidimensional and fragmented datasets

To analyze the semi-structured interviews systematically, I transcribed the audio files using Otranscribe and, subsequently, analyzed the transcripts using AtlasTI. Qualitative data in this research can be characterized as multidimensional, because the interviews cover subjects that are fragmented over policy domains, scales and stakeholders. For the coding of the texts, I roughly followed the data analysis scheme of Stoffelen (2019), which fits the explorative nature of this research. He describes a cyclical coding-scheme consisting of ten steps. The coding part of the scheme as used in this research will shortly be explained. The approach starts with descriptive coding which encompasses assigning initial labels to texts (Stoffelen, 2019). After completing this step 309 codes were identified. This includes unique codes as well as codes that were applied more frequently. Descriptive coding was followed by pattern coding; the reorganizing and regrouping of codes in overarching themes. During this step descriptive codes are merged, renamed and deleted which established some hierarchy in the data (Cope, 2010). After this step 110 codes were left. Thirdly, an ''empty'' provisional coding scheme was made based on relevant literature and concepts from the theoretical framework. Six main themes were identified which were subdivided in 21 subthemes (appendix 2). It is referred to as empty coding scheme because it is not used to recode the transcripts (Stoffelen,

2019). Subsequently, a comparison was made between the themes identified in the pattern coding process and the provisional coding scheme (Table 2). The provisional coding scheme was then used to analyze the selected quotes structurally. In this my approach differs from the Stoffelen (2019). Stoffelen (2019) uses the provisional coding scheme to create a hierarchical coding scheme after which another recoding round is done. However, due to time limitations no hierarchical coding round was done.

Table 2: Overarching themes identified from pattern coding and the provisional coding (Based on Stoffelen, 2019)

Descriptive coding	Pattern coding	Provisional coding scheme
Unstructured codes	Configuration discussions and pre-merger cooperation	Scale-enlargement, deinstitutionalization
	Resistance and community involvement	Resistance and legitimacy
	Sociocultural markers and regional orientation	Regional identity and sense of place
	Regional identity practically implemented in merger process	Thick and thin identities
	Border correction Middag Humsterland	Stickiness of regions
	Tourism and branding	Place-promotion, marketing and branding
	Importance document, dates and facts	

In the post-coding phase of the analysis, the coded interviews were cross-referenced with sections from the literature review. Finally, by linking back insights from interviews with policymakers and experts the role of socio-cultural connections in the Hogeland merger process was identified. This, thus, built on the knowledge acquired in earlier stages of the research.

6.2 Research ethics

This research involved interaction with different individuals, groups, and stakeholders, which can potentially had both positive and negative implications for those involved. Employing ethical research standards avoids harming the people involved (Dowling, 2016; Hay, 2010).

Self-reflexivity contributes to the establishment of rigor (Hay, 2010). In case of this case-study positionality is to be considered especially. The researcher was raised within the research area which might have influenced his frame of reference. The researcher has a preconceived idea about the regional identity discourses which are in place. The aim was however to maintain objective and rigorous during the research.

Before the interviews, an informed consent (Appendix 3) was signed by both the interviewee and the researcher. The design of the informed consent was based on Dunn (2016) and the Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (2018). The form, signed by both the researcher and the interviewees addressed: audio-recording, confidential use of data, the possibility to remain anonymous, the possibility to change answers afterwards and the purpose of the research. Additionally, it was stressed during the interviews that participants could stop at any moment during the interview.

The following result section is structured according to the above mentioned multiple staged approach. I have opted for this funnel-structure because it first provides context (regional consciousness, merger process) which is needed to better understand the incorporation of sociocultural connections. This structure, subsequently, enabled me to approach the role of regional identity in the merger of Het Hogeland by connecting insights from the previous sections.

7. Results

7.1 Regional consciousness in Het Hogeland

Prior to studying the institutionalization of the Hogeland municipality in relation to regional identity it is needed have an understanding of the regional consciousness of its inhabitants (Zimmerbauer et al, 2017).

7.1.1 Population composition and distribution

The survey set out by Stoffelen et al. (2020), which is used in this study, had 169 respondents. Six of the respondents were left out of the analysis because they did not officially live within the Hogeland region, resulting in 163 usable surveys. Table 3 shows the gender distribution in absolute and relative numbers.

Table 3: Absolute and relative distribution of gender of survey respondents. Source: Stoffelen et al., 2020

	Frequency	Percentage
Male	72	44,2%
Female	89	54,6%
Different	1	0.6%
Missing	1	0.6%
Total	163	100%

There is a relatively even distribution between male and female respondents. An equal distribution can be considered as beneficial for the interpretation of the results. Respondents had an average age of 32,7 years. Ranging from 10 to 78 years old. No specific age group is over- or underrepresented in the survey. The average time of residence in Hogeland region was 26,7 years. Respondents thus averagely lived a considerable part of their lives in the region. Some, mainly younger, respondents lived in the Hogeland their entire lives.

Figure 2 shows the relative distribution of respondents in the municipality based on postal codes. The map shows that a large part of the area has been covered to some extent by the survey. Place of residence of respondents seems to correspond with settlements in the municipality, as might be expected. It must be noted, however, that there some gaps in the distribution, illustrated by the grey areas. The grey areas are mainly in south, south-west and west of the municipality. The relatively low response rates in the south, south-west, and west can probably be explained by the distribution of high schools in the province and their railway connection. The survey has been, as mentioned above, distributed through high school pupils of Het Hogeland College. Pupils from the former municipality of Bedum, however, more frequently attend high schools in either the city of Groningen or Delfzijl because it is better

connected by railway. Most respondents come from postal code areas with relatively large settlements in the north and middle of the Hogeland region.

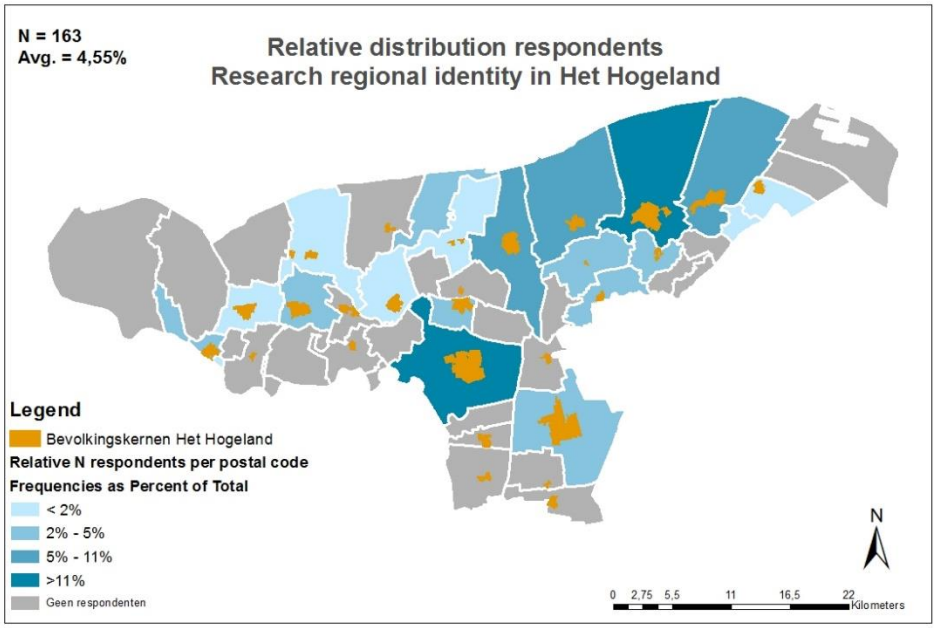

Fig. 2. Relative distribution respondents of the survey on regional identity in the Hogeland by Stoffelen et al. (2020).

7.1.2 Associations with the Hogeland region

The question about associations with the Hogeland region resulted in 646 words which were organized in codegroups (Table 4). These codegroups are based on frequently mentioned and similar associations, similar to subjectively constructed codegroups of Hoving (2010). Not all respondents filled in four words in the designated areas and some mentioned an extra association, which were coded as well. Table 4 shows how often codes were applied to the associations. Based on this some assumptions can be made regarding the regional consciousness of inhabitants of Het Hogeland.

The largest code group that was mentioned was related to the agricultural character of the region. The code agriculture consisted codes like *'Boerderij'* (Farm), *'Platteland'* (Countryside) and *'Polder'*. This shows that the respondents associate the Hogeland most with agriculture-oriented economy has been and still is a relevant sector in the region

Table 4: Inhabitant associations with the Hogeland region divided inductively in larger themes. Source: Stoffelen et al., 2020

Codegroup	
Tangible elements	**Frequencies**
Agriculture	170
Openness	122
Landscape	121
Built environment	67
Water	67
Misc	14
Animals	11
Intangible elements	
Quietness	44
Experience	29
Total codes	646

The second largest code group was openness. Respondents relative frequently stressed the openness of the region by mentioning words like *'Weidsheid'* (Expanse), *'Ruimte'* (Spaciousness) and *'Vergezichten'* (Views). This indicates that the flatness and openness of the region is a relevant aspect of the identity of the region as experienced by its inhabitants. Secondly, landscape elements were mentioned often in relation to the Hogeland. Landscape is a relatively broad category. It consists of associations that refer to both the natural domain in terms of *'bossen'* (forests), 'plants' and 'trees' and to larger geomorpholical elements in the in the landscape like *'Wierden'/'Terpen'* (Dwelling mounds) and *'dijken'* (Dykes). Especially dykes were frequently associated with the Hogeland. It has to be noted that even though openness can be considered as a landscape element, it has its own category due to high number of associations with this term. Something these three large code groups have in common is that they are clearly visible in the landscape, or in the case of openness absent in the landscape.

Quietness and experience, two categories which were mentioned considerably less often, refer not to the physical more tangible elements people associate the Hogeland with but to the experiential relation of people with the environment. This explains the distinction that has been made between tangible and intangible elements in table 4**.** Frequently mentioned for

the *'quietness'* code was *'Rust'* (Calmness/Quietness). *'Rust'* cannot easily be considered as either positive of negative, as it does not indicate whether people like the calmness or not. This can, however, be substantiated with the code group 'experience'. In this group the Hogeland was mainly experienced positively, referring to associations like *'Mooi'* (Beautiful), '*Bijzonder'* (Special). Few associations (4) stress a negative experience of the Hogeland as *'saai'* (Boring).

For this research different codegroups have been used than the research of Hoving (2010). This has been decided because some of the categories by Hoving (2010) were considered too broad. Agriculture, in the research of Hoving (2010), was for example not a separate category. I, however, opted to make a separate codegroup for agriculture, due to the vast amount of associations related to agriculture. Despite this, the results of this research show some similarities with the research of Hoving (2010). In both studies inhabitants frequently mention the openness, the agricultural character, and elements like dwelling mounds, indicating that the attitudes and ideas about the region have not changed drastically since 2010. Remarkably, the survey used in the research of Stoffelen et al. (2020) research also encompasses three additional municipalities namely: Bedum, Winsum and De Marne. This is a prudent indication that there are similar associations with the Hogeland region throughout the former municipalities that make up Het Hogeland. A notable difference with the research of Hoving (2010) is the frequency of associations in the intangible elements group. In Hoving (2010) intangible elements like *'Rust'* (Calmness) and *'Gezelligheid'* (Coziness) were mentioned considerably more often.

The results of this research substantiate the argument of Buijs et al. (2002) and Hoving (2010) that elements that associated with a region are interrelated. The frequently mentioned associations categorized under openness most probably result from the relative flatness of the region and the absence of major tree growth. Openness emphasizes elements that in environments with more relief would maybe draw less attention like dikes, churches, and dwelling mounds.

7.1.3 Characterizing landscape elements

The second question of the survey by Stoffelen et al. (2020) asked respondents to what degree twenty specified landscape elements characterize the Hogeland. The results of this question substantiate the associations that were discussed previously. The landscape elements and the corresponding mean scores are shown in table 5. As mentioned, this question and its structure has been based on Hoving (2010). Respondents were asked to rate the landscape elements on an ordinal scale from 1-5. 5-4 meaning that a landscape element is very characterizing, 3 is a neutral score and 2-1 means that a landscape element was not characterizing. It must be noted that the mean scores of Stoffelen et al. (2020) are somewhat lower than the scores measured by Hoving (2010) (Table 5).

The five highest mean scores will shortly be discussed and compared to the research of Hoving (2010) as they partly reflect the regional consciousness of inhabitants. *'Dijken'*(Dykes) were attributed the highest score. Inhabitants seem to consider dykes as a relevant identity marker for the region. This is possibly also related to the research of Buijs (2002) and Hoving (2010) who argue that that landscape elements are interrelated. Thus, elements with relief stand out in flat landscapes. This might also explain the relatively high score for *'bomen'* (trees).

Other highly rated elements were *'rust en stilte'* (peace and quiet) and *'large-scale openness'* (grootschalige openheid). Inhabitants also frequently mentioned these elements in the question about associations and the study of Hoving (2010) also shows relatively high scores for these landscape elements. It can be argued that the spaciousness of the Hogeland region can be considered as relevant marker for the regional consciousness of inhabitants.

Additionally, inhabitants stress the agricultural character of the region. Agriculture had a relatively high mean score of 4,2 and agriculture-related associations were mentioned most in the first question of the survey. This shared agricultural character has also been used as argumentation why the BMWE were a good fit for each other (Zienswijze op Herindelingsadvies, 2017). These high scores and the use of this by municipalities reflect that agriculture is regarded as a key-marker for the Hogeland identity-discourse.

Table 5: Landscape elements and corresponding mean scores, medians, modes. Scores from Hoving (2010) in italic. Source: Hoving, 2010; Stoffelen et al., 2020

Landscape elements	Mean	Median	Mode
Dijken	4,56 *(4,4)*	5 *(5)*	5 *(5)*
Rust en stilte	4,25 *(4,7)*	5 *(5)*	5 *(5)*
Bomen	4,19 *(3,6)*	5 *(4)*	5 *(3)*
Akkerbouw	4,17 *(4,3)*	4 *(4)*	5 *(5)*
Grootschalige openheid	3,95 *(4,4)*	4 *(5)*	4 *(5)*
Boerenerven	3,89 *(4,2)*	4 *(4)*	4 *(5)*
Bruggetjes	3,81 *(4,1)*	4 *(4)*	4 *4)*
Pel-/ graanmolens	3,80 *(3,9)*	4 *(4)*	4 *(5)*
Kwelders	3,76 *(4,1)*	4 *(4)*	4 *(5)*
Wierden	3,75 *(4,4)*	4 *(5)*	4 *(5)*
Kerken	3,74 *(4,4)*	4 *(5)*	4 *(5)*
Monumentale boerderijen	3,73 *(4,5)*	4 *(5)*	4 *(5)*
Borgen	3,73 *(4,3)*	4 *(4)*	4 *(5)*
Sluizen	3,58 *(3,4)*	4 *(3)*	4 *(3)*
Kronkelende sloten en kanalen	3,55 *(3,9)*	4 *(4)*	4 *(5)*
Duisternis	3,40 *(4,0)*	4 *(4)*	5 *(5)*
Ruilverkavelingsbosjes	3,01 *(x)*	3 *(x)*	3 *(x)*
Verkavelingspatroon	2,98 *(x)*	3 *(x)*	3 *(x)*
Moderne windmolens	2,93 *(3,1)*	3 *(3)*	3 *(3)*
Steenfabrieken	2,69 *(2,7)*	3 *(3)*	3 *(2)*
Rechte kanalen en sloten	2,66 *(2,8)*	3 *(3)*	3 *(2)*
Megastallen	2,26 *(2,0)*	2 *(2)*	1 *(1)*

Even though regional consciousness is subjective (Paasi, 2011), this chapter based on the research by Stoffelen et al. (2020), has shown the general perception of regional identity by inhabitants of Het Hogeland. A general understanding of the discourse that is in place will help to understand the practical implementation of sociocultural connections which will be discussed later in this thesis.

7.2 From cluster cooperation to municipal amalgamation

7.2.1 Prelude to change

This section will elaborate on the context and the run-up to the municipal merger. From around 2008 cooperation was established between multiple municipalities in the province of Groningen. At that moment in time most municipalities did not have positive attitudes towards merging into a larger municipality:

> Actually the tone was, like I interpreted it, like we do not want to merge but we do want to cooperate. *(K. Rutgers, Alderwoman of Het Hogeland and former councilor of Bedum)*

Municipalities generally advocated the SETA model which means ''Samen en toch apart'' (Together but separately) which is illustrated by the following quote:

> This implied that one predominantly steers towards official (ambtelijke) cooperation. Because I saw the vulnerability of civil organizations of small municipalities which got more and more tasks. (…) So I assumed that we cooperated but that we could continue to exist independently as municipality. (R. Michels, former mayor of Winsum*)*

Cooperation was recommended by the *Vereniging van Groninger Gemeent*en (VGG) because municipalities did not have administrative capacity to deal with a growing amount of responsibilities that resulted from decentralization (Grenzeloos Grunnen, 2013). So, the goal of cluster cooperation was to create more resilient administrations that were able to deal with these responsibilities. Municipalities, for example, cooperated in terms of their ICT and HR departments. Cooperation partners were based on clusters of municipalities that have similar

characteristics. An example of a cluster was the BMW, municipalities Bedum, de Marne and Winsum. These municipalities largely had similar population sizes, settlement-distribution, and societal issues. Remarkably, the former municipality of Eemsmond which has merged into Het Hogeland was assigned to the DEAL cluster (Delfzijl, Eemsmond, Appingedam and Loppersum). Even though cluster cooperation slightly reduced the vulnerability of small municipalities it did not provide the intended results. In 2013 commission *Bestuurlijke toekomst Groningen* was instated in order to evaluate the sustainability of cluster cooperation in Groningen. Cooperation between BMW, for example, lacked mutual trust and goals (Grenzeloos Grunnen, 2013). One remarkable downside of the DEAL cluster was that the municipality of Eemsmond was not involved in all partnerships because of their sociocultural and historical orientation on the BMW municipalities (Grenzeloos Grunnen, 2013). This is a theme that also became apparent in the conducted interviews (see below). Additionally, municipal councils had trouble to unanimously agree with each other about issues like joint IT and HR departments. This made interaction between municipalities lengthy and laborious. This influenced the decision-making process in the municipalities:

> So, the feeling arises that we did things to speed things up and because we didn't want to slow things down. So considering decisions not only based on content but also on process. (…) That's when you get the first cracks in the wall, like maybe consider merging after all. *(R. Michels, former mayor of Winsum)*

In 2013 the document *Grenzeloos Grunnen* was presented by this commission. Next to an evaluation of the troublesome situation, Grenzeloos Grunnen also provided recommendations for the administrative future of Groningen. During this period of cooperation, the national Dutch government initialized decentralization measures which implied that various welfare systems were to be transferred to the municipal level (Terlouw, 2018). So, based on decentralization and the already hard cooperation between vulnerable administrations, Grenzeloos Grunnen recommended municipalities to merge into more resilient configurations. The recommendation of merging is mainly based on rational economic considerations. At this point municipalities were, although to varying degrees, convinced that a merger was inevitable. Despite this municipalities initially did not harbor positive feelings towards a potential merger.

7.2.2 Configuration discussions: Together but in what way?

Following the Grenzeloos Grunnen publication municipalities in Groningen started to consider potential merger configurations. The document advised on potential combinations of municipalities that had preference because of their hypothetical resilience and shared characteristics. Some configurations will shortly be explained because this context partly reflects the regional identity discourses that were and maybe still are in place. Optional configurations differed from municipality to municipality and preferences of councils greatly varied over the years. The configuration discussions lasted long and did not prove to be very productive:

> Only then the battle for Northern Groningen started. (…) And I call it a battle because the interests as well as the contrasts were fairly large (*R. Michels, former mayor of Winsum)*

One of the configurations that was discussed over the course of a few years was the *G7*, a combination of two of the recommendations from Grenzeloos Grunnen. G7 would have consisted out of seven municipalities: Delfzijl, Eemsmond, Appingedam, Loppersum, Winsum, Bedum and de Marne. G7 would have become a particularly large municipality which stretched out from the Eems-Dollard estuary to Lauwersoog. The G7 configuration was discussed thoroughly from in the period 2013-2016 (Figure 3). Relevant for this research is why ultimately this configuration was not opted for. Because configuration discussions already lasted too long the initial deadlines from Grenzeloos Grunnen could not be made. Not all municipalities were comfortable with a municipality as large as the G7:

> Well the most important reason for resistance was that it (G7) was way too large. A gigantic area with almost 90.00 inhabitants and a gigantic amount of settlements. (…) Because I foresaw that that contact between the administration, with that I also mean parliament, and inhabitants would heavily dilute. (*R. Michels, former mayor of Winsum)*

> And from the perspective of the municipal council it would have become too large with Loppersum, Appingedam and Delfzijl *(K. Rutgers, Alderwoman of Het Hogeland and former councilor of Bedum)*

These statements correspond with the research of Zimmerbauer et al. (2012) and Terlouw and van Gorp (2014) who mention the growing distance between administrations and local communities in amalgamated municipalities. Eventually it became clear that the G7 option would not gain enough support. Meanwhile time was running short and provincial and national governments were pressing municipalities to decide. This is when other smaller configurations rapidly became viable options.

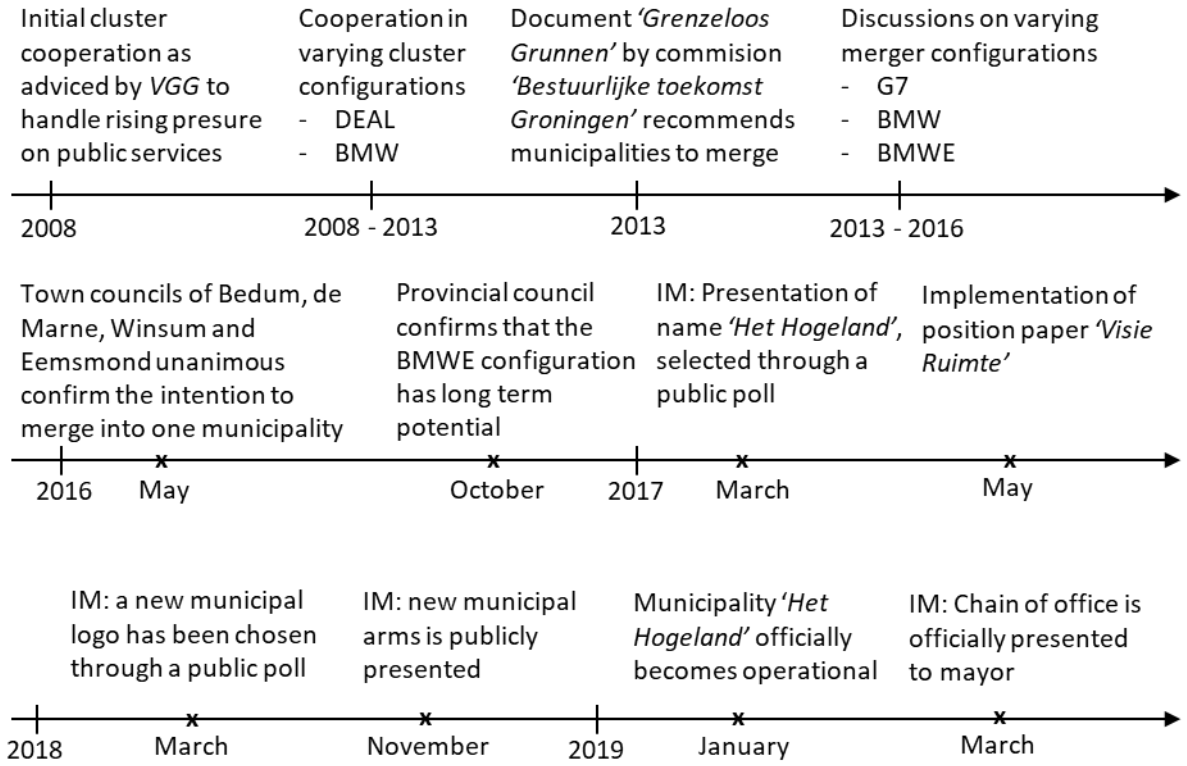

Fig. 3: Timeline merger municipality Het Hogeland. Timeline includes practical identity related decisions and subjects (IM = identity marker)

Meanwhile, the municipalities Bedum, de Marne and Winsum (BMW) who already had cooperated in a cluster became more convinced that a smaller BMW municipality was the answer. The BMW, however, felt that the combination of their municipalities would not have enough administrative power in relation to the size of other surrounding municipalities.

Therefore, BMW wanted to include Eemsmond to solidify their position as municipality and to avoid creating a mismatch in terms of administrative power.

> (…) that also is one of the criteria that is being considered. Will it not create a mismatch between the different municipalities in the same region? The power relations. (*R. Michels, former mayor of Winsum)*

Additionally, it became apparent that the BMW would not have the financial strength to be sufficiently operational. This lack can be explained by the relatively low incomes from municipal taxes which is caused by relatively low entrepreneurial activity in the BMW region. Selecting Eemsmond firstly was a rational decision to even out the power relations in the region. The surrounding municipalities would have become too large in terms of administrative power which was regarded as undesirable.

Grenzeloos Grunnen (2013) had already recommended a BMWE municipality. Only in their recommendation they argued that the Eemshaven, de industrial part of Eemsmond should merge with the Delfzijl to unify the harbor areas. This rational economic division led to resistance in Eemsmond. Some fractions in the Eemsmond council preferred the inclusion of Eemshaven should they merge with BMW. This was based not only on economic considerations but also on sociocultural discourses:

> When you assume an economic perspective you say: we've got a Groningen Seaports who owns the harbors in Delfzijl and in Eemshaven. That's a unity. Magnificent. However, inhabitants don't have anything with an economic approach like that. They have more with a regional sense. *(E. Dijkhuis. Alderman of Het Hogeland and former councilor of Eemsmond)*

This quote indicates that there was an established sense of region in Eemsmond about the Eemshaven, which influenced the configurations discussion. Alderman Dijkhuis links this firstly to the pride of inhabitants regarding the development of the Eemshaven. Many inhabitants have seen the Eemshaven develop from empty land to a bustling harbor with a strong strategic importance. Secondly, historical regional orientation is mentioned as argument for sentiments

about the Eemshaven (see 7.3.2.). Even though initially the choice for including Eemsmond in BMW(E) was based on rational aspirations, regional identity discourses also have shown to be relevant in the configurations process:

> So we have chosen for the sociocultural side and not for the economic side. This while the whole discussion initially was about economics. *(E. Dijkhuis. Alderman of Het Hogeland and former councilor of Eemsmond)*

In May 2016, the councils of the BMWE unanimously decided the intention to merge into one municipality (Figure 3). The provincial executive council which initially supported the division of Eemsmond were not in favor of this solution and requested a written document that showed why a BMWE municipality would be a viable option. At this point shared characteristics became increasingly relevant to convince the provincial executive council of the resilience and coherency of the BMWE. The BMWE designed the *'Zienswijze on herindelingsadvies'* (2017) in which they explain several characteristics which they have in common. In this document the municipalities stress, among other things, their shared historical ties with the Hunsingo region, which is the name of an administrative region from the Medieval period. Furthermore, it stresses the agricultural character and rural settlement structure as shared elements (Zienswijze op Herindelingsadvies, 2017). The configuration discussion shows that shared characteristics become increasingly important to foster support for merging among varying stakeholders.

However, based on the interviews it can stated that implementation of sociocultural connections was not the main concern during the merger. Instead most issues and invested time related to the organizational and rational economic aspects of the municipal merger.

> In that sense they were critical about it [practical implementation sociocultural connections]. (…) However, how do you handle staff, does IT function properly can the counters open in January? That all is a thousand times more important. *(E. van der Gugten, Assistant to the program manager)*

> But I doubt whether that practically got a lot of attention *(K. Rutgers, Alderwoman of Het Hogeland and former councilor of Bedum)*

These quotations show that the practical and organizational aspects of the merger relatively played a more emphasized role in the process. Practical aspects took up a lot of the time and energy of municipal stakeholders.

> Yes, eventually you just see, when looking at the time investment, that the merger process itself in the organization takes up about eighty percent of the energy of everybody. *(R. Michels, former mayor of Winsum)*

Interviewees indicated that the fusion of four organizations is complex and time-consuming process to do in two years while remaining functional. Aligning goals and joining departments can cause friction which makes the organizational aspects predominantly relevant. Shared sociocultural connections played a small role during the merger process, however, interviewees indicated that it was a significant role nonetheless.

> Actually, this [regional identity] is the foundation that you further don't see very expressively in the merger process. Because in the end a merger is a fusion process (…) Identity plays a leading role in that, a vision like *Ruimte* is defining in shaping that process. *(R. Michels, former mayor of Winsum)*

Michels stresses the importance of a shared identity narrative. The document *Ruimte* (2017), the position paper Het Hogeland has created, reflects the goals of the new municipality. This future oriented narrative has been the basis for cooperation for both organizational and identity aspects of the merger. From an organizational perspective it has been mobilized as foundation for new policy. From an identity perspective it has been used as guideline.

After the approval of the *Zienswijze* (2017) by the provincial board in October 2016 the BMWE set a merger deadline for January the first of 2019. This left two years to structure the merger and join the organizations. Before elaborating on the practical implementation of sociocultural

connections an estimation will be made of the levels of resistance before and during the merger process.

7.2.3 Resistance to the Hogeland merger

Resistance to municipal amalgamations are generally based on either rational-economic or sociocultural objections (Terlouw, 2016; Zimmerbauer et al., 2012). Rational-economic objections are often related to public services and scale enlargement while sociocultural objections are grounded in an emotional relation to a region or place. A remarkable result from the interviews is that sociocultural objections were hardly mentioned as a cause for resistance in the Hogeland merger. However, two interviewees mention Bedum as place where sociocultural based resistance was more present than in other former municipalities. They argued that in Bedum were higher levels of resistance because they did not been through a municipal merger in 1990 while all other former municipalities in the region had been. Because of this Bedummers supposedly had a more rooted regional identity that went back to the nineteenth century. Additionally, according to different geomorphological perspectives on the Hogeland, Bedum does not belong to the region. However, when asked about resistance in Bedum the former councilwoman of the municipality of Bedum put it differently:

> I hardly noticed that. On average people did not see the use of a merger. And indeed the fear: will my services still be accessible? Won't my taxes go up? *(K. Rutgers, Alderwoman of Het Hogeland and former councilor of Bedum)*

Inhabitants worry that a municipal merger will affect the services that they are used to. Rational-economic considerations like worry about public services and scale enlargement played a predominant role despite the incorporation of sociocultural elements.

> For the inhabitants the painful part was; the municipality is further away from us. (…) this has to do with scale and the scale of the municipality. Maybe you knew a civil servant personally and then you knew: I need that person for a permit. *(E. van der Gugten, Assistant to the program manager)*

> If you just ask someone on the streets what they find important. Then it's still about: when will my street by redeveloped? Or what about the waste collection? *(E. Dijkhuis. Alderman of Het Hogeland and former councilor of Eemsmond*

Inhabitants seems to mostly worry about the practical side of the municipal merger. This shows links with the research of Zimmerbauer et al. (2012) who argue that the provision of services can explain activism against deinstitutionalization. Interviewees additionally stressed that inhabitants did not always seem to be very interested in merger discussions. Interviewees additionally stressed that when in the run-up to the merger the municipal governments tried to involve inhabitants, they did not always seem to be very interested. Few inhabitants showed up at the public meetings about the merger. Interviewees linked this indifferency to the bureaucratic nature of the merger plans and that apart from service-related objections it does not touch their day-to-day lives:

> That was a real eyeopener for me. We saw, subsequently, that in the small settlements the attendance was proportionally higher but still low. The only settlement with high attendance was Ezinge. (*R. Michels, former mayor of Winsum)*

Similar to Zimmerbauer et al. (2012) not all activism can be explained from rational economic objections. Resistance based on sociocultural connections was relatively minimal in most of the Hogeland region. In Ezinge, however, inhabitants did show resistance which was based on the regional identity discourse in the settlement. Ultimately this has resulted in a border correction, making Ezinge part of municipality Westerkwartier which is west of Het Hogeland. This border correction in the region of Middag-Humsterland was a significant theme in the merger-process and was frequently mentioned by interviewees as most notable form of resistance. Therefore, this will be discussed more thoroughly in the next section.

7.3 Sticky regions and rooted orientation

7.3.1 The stickiness of Middag-Humsterland

Middag Humsterland is situated west in the former municipality of Winsum (Figure 4). The former municipality has its borders beyond the Reitdiep river in the west. From historical

Fig. 4: Map showing the border correction in Middag-Humsterland.

perspective this region belongs to Middag-Humsterland. Middag-Humsterland is a national landscape which in the middle ages consisted out of the two islands of '*Middag'* and *'Humsterland'.* Historical roots remain to play a role in the local communities. The unification of Middag-Humsterland was already being discussed when the merger was in the configuration phase:

> One of the first signals that explicitly came forward from the community was that in Ezinge they stated; if it comes to a municipal merger a historical mistake has to be righted. (*R. Michels, former mayor of Winsum)*

In 1990 Middag-Humsterland was divided over separate municipalities. After the region had lost its statutory status regional consciousness remained to be based on the old Middag-Humsterland region. This phenomenon of ties with institutionalized regions from the past has been observed and conceptualized by Zimmerbauer et al. (2017) as stickiness of regions. It can be argued that Middag-Humsterland was to a certain degree ''sticky''. The inhabitants of

this region made known to the mayor of Winsum that they preferred to rejoin the Middag-Humsterland region. The major part of Middag-Humsterland was going to be part of the municipality Westerkwartier. The stickiness of Middag-Humsterland can possibly be explained by the concepts of soft and hardened places by Zimmerbauer et al. (2017). Middag-Humsterland has hardened over time, dating back to the Middle Ages, implying that the municipality of Winsum on the contrary, institutionalized in 1990, can be regarded as a soft layer over the existing regional systems. It must be noted that multiple regional systems can exist in parallel, however some are stickier than others (Zimmerbauer et al., 2017). The municipality of Winsum due to its relatively short existence and lack of common historical roots did not become a region people in Middag-Humsterland identify with. Middag-Humsterland seemed to be deeply embedded in the regional consciousness of the inhabitants of the region, which might explain why the community in the Middag-Humsterland region remain to identify with the region:

> And that people in terms of identity and experience felt more for the Westerkwartier. Inhabitants felt more Westerkwartierder than Hogelandster. (*R. Michels, former mayor of Winsum)*

Early in the merger process the former mayor of Winsum indicated that the municipality would aim to respect the wishes of its inhabitants by letting them choose which municipality they wanted to belong to:

> We have had elections for that, because we wanted Middag-Humsterland to be together again as cultural landscape (*M. Sorgdrager,Gold/silver smith and inhabitant of Westerkwartier)*

When the BMWE merger was approved by the provincial executive council, the municipality organized elections in the region west of the Reitdiep river. This is an indicator that regional identity has been taken in account from an early stage of the merger process.

> That's when you saw that connection. What place do people identify with you know? You could see it nicely reflected. In Ezinge was a large majority in favor of joining

> Westerkwartier, in Garnwerd it ultimately was just the majority and Feerwerd was in between. (*R. Michels, former mayor of Winsum)*

The election showed a gradual result showing that settlements near Westerkwartier were more eager to join Middag-Humsterland than inhabitants near Winsum (now located in Het Hogeland). Firstly, this indicates that inhabitants do not necessarily identify with the hard borders of institutionalized regions, substantiating the argument of Zimmerbauer et al. (2017) that multiple regional systems exist in one spatiality. Secondly, the election results show links to the relational perspective on regional identity. Borders are, from this perspective, no exclusive differentiators but porous lines where multiple identities overlap (Paasi, 2011). It can be argued that this is visible in the gradual result from the election. Feerwerd, where the results were more divided, could be regarded as a place where regional consciousness related to Middag-Humsterland and the Hogeland overlaps. By allowing inhabitants to decide over the administrative future of their region the municipality of Winsum preemptively weakened the levels of resistance.

Another example of resistance, however not located in Het Hogeland, is the village Middelstum. In Middelstum a similar situation occurred as in Middag-Humsterland. The village located south-east of Het Hogeland is part of the municipality of Loppersum which is planned to merge into municipality Eemsdelta in 2021. Some interviewees, however, indicated that Middelstum does not feel connected with the municipality they are now part of and the one they will be part of in the future. There was a call from inhabitants to allow the village to have elections about joining the municipality Het Hogeland.

> In a while they have to get their passport in Delfzijl. Well that feels completely unnatural. You can almost trace that back to the old region of Fivelingo and Hunsingo. There's something in the landscape.. *(E. Dijkhuis. Alderman of Het Hogeland and former councilor of Eemsmond)*

Even though Middelstum was not permitted to decide over their administrative future, it is interesting to study the motives behind the positive attitudes towards Het Hogeland. Stickiness of these old regions has already been mentioned as an explanation for the border

correction in Middag-Humsterland. A topic that has been mentioned frequently by interviewees is the rooted orientation of the region they live in. This specifically has been mentioned as an explanation of why the current configuration has been chosen and why the border correction has taken place, which is why it will be elaborated on next.

7.3.2 Collective memories and rooted regional orientation

Several interviewees stress the presence of a rooted regional orientation in Het Hogeland which is based on historical notions and geomorphological characteristics of the landscape. In the middle ages three large administrative areas Fivelgo, Hunsingo and Westerkwartier, which were called the Ommelanden (the surroundings lands). Both the geomorphological and the administrative Hogeland region largely overlap with the Hunsingo region (Figure 5 and 6).

Fig. 5: Map of the administrative borders of the Ommelanden. (Hunsingo in yellow) Source: Beckeringh (1781) in Hillenga, Reinders and van der Woud (2016)

Fig. 6: Current administrative border of municipality Het Hogeland.

The administrative areas north of the city of Groningen all had an orientation towards the city where goods were traded. Over time north-south oriented connections towards the city came into existence. Firstly, these connections are visible physically in the infrastructural structure that is oriented towards Groningen.

> There just is a road-structure and a waterway-structure. Something that has its origins in the developing area [development of the Hogeland region]. And in one way or another we all follow that structure. *(E. Dijkhuis. Alderman of Het Hogeland and former councilor of Eemsmond)*

Physical structures with a north-south orientation make that inhabitants are mostly directed to the city of Groningen instead of settlements east and west. Secondly, the historically rooted physical orientation in terms of infrastructure, arguably, became embedded in the regional consciousness of inhabitants.

> So the area of Eemsmond is very orientated on the city (Groningen), Bedum and everything that is in between. It just has nothing to do with Delfzijl or Appingedam in terms of human relations. There's actually an invisible wall between Spijk and Oosteinde. *(E. Dijkhuis. Alderman of Het Hogeland and former councilor of Eemsmond)*

Abovementioned ''*invisible wall*'' can be regarded as a mental border between regions that does is not bound to recent administrative borders of municipalities. The north-south is strongly emphasized by the interviewee as something that is generally experienced. However, regional connections are not only north-south oriented.

> However, there's also cross-connections between the settlements. Admittedly limited, but they do exist and that plays a significant role. (…) So the last 25 years administrative cross-connections were within the Hogeland area. With Westerkwartier they were actually minimal. *(R. Michels, former mayor of Winsum)*

The administrative cross-connections that are mentioned were mainly between villages in the former municipalities, but also between former BMWE municipalities that make up Het Hogeland. Cross-connections generally stayed within the area now consists of Het Hogeland. Remarkable is that the Hogeland borders more or less correspond with the Hunsingo region. It could be argued that the Hunsingo region is sticky to such a degree that it still influences recent politics and cooperation partners. The Hogeland and Hunsingo are historical narratives which are commonly used. In the region seems to be a collective notion of the Hogeland and to lesser extent Hunsingo. Both names have been actively used in the merger process (see 7.4.1).

Solidified connections that are part of the landscape and the influence on the regional consciousness of inhabitants can be linked to the territorial perspective on regional identity.

The Hogeland region and the connections in place are the product of the path dependency of culture, politics, and economics. Jones and MacLeod (2004) refer to this as the source of regional identity. A territorial perspective, according Zimmerbauer et al. (2012), views regional identity as a more or less fixed and stable phenomenon, product of a set of regional characteristics. This perspective can be recognized in the following quote from one of the interviewees:

> And you see that the Hogeland, and the Hogeland starts just past Winsum geographically speaking, there you see that there has been way more land consolidation. But there you also frequently see those stretched out lands. That creates a different type of inhabitant. *(R. Michels, former mayor of Winsum)*

This suggests that characterizing landscape elements influence the regional consciousness of inhabitants. Thereby, this interviewee, argues in line with the territorialist perspective on regional identity. From this perspective a region, the Hogeland in this case, is seen as a container of a specific regional identity (Prokkola et al., 2015). However, Prokkola et al. (2015) argue from a relational point of view that place and region are an arena for multiple identities and that regional identity is only of the identities of people. But why then do people continue to identify with the region they live in?

> It isn't the case anymore that world becomes larger and larger. Often you see that view narrows down. (…) People are in search of something that binds them. *(E. Dijkhuis. Alderman of Het Hogeland and former councilor of Eemsmond)*

This quotation strongly links to the work of Maffesoli (1996) who coined the term neo-tribalism to explain the innate need of people to identify with a relatively tangible group. This explains why people who are often able to identify with a wide variety of places and things, whether they are tangible or digital, choose to identify with the region or the municipality they live in, in this case Het Hogeland.

This discussion on orientation shows that interviewees there is a collective sense of regionality in the Hogeland region. The region arguably is a site of collective memory (Raivo, 2004) where

more recent differences in collective memory (i.e. in the political landscape) play a smaller role for the identification process of inhabitants.

7.4 Practical implementation of sociocultural narratives

Apart from the history and statutory functions of municipalities, identification with municipalities can be explained by symbolization (Zimmerbauer, 2012). Symbols linked to the collective memory, like a coat of arms (Zimmerbauer, 2012) and place-specific names (Williams & Stewart, 1996), can potentially be mobilized by administrations, in this case municipalities, to tie inhabitants to a spatial configuration. This section will discuss practical examples of incorporation of regional identity by Het Hogeland.

7.4.1 Naming Het Hogeland

The first practical example of incorporation of regional identity is the selection of the name for the municipality. In March 2017, the name *'Het Hogeland*' has been chosen by inhabitants through a public poll. Inhabitants had the option to choose between Hogeland, Marenland and Hunsingo. Marenland, not mentioned before, refers to *''maren''*, a word from the dialect of Groningen for the waterways and streams that characterize the landscape. Marenland then translates to land of streams. With 71% ''Hogeland'' had a clear majority of the votes (Dagblad van het Noorden, 2017). Second was Hunsingo with 16% and third Marenland with 13%. That Hunsingo came second might be due to the described stickiness of this historical region. The outcome with Marenland and Hunsing, however, differ not much. The potential names either refer to old administrative region or geomorphological features of the landscape. A commission of inhabitants varying in age and gender had been selected by the municipality which has select these names from a list around 240 submissions for potential names (Dagblad van het Noorden, 2017). The names on the shortlist were selected because they were frequently mentioned, and/or because the commission found it characterizing for the region.

Knowing and using common or traditional place names is a relevant in the management of spaces (Williams & Stewart, 1998). Williams and Stewart (1998) argue that names represent a powerful link between people and place. Names symbolize historical narratives and meanings which can be deeply embedded in the regional consciousness of inhabitants. The

BMWE decided that inhabitants should be able to choose the name they felt to be most fitting for their new municipality. When asked about the relevance of letting inhabitants decide this was sociocultural implementation was illustrated:

> That is important because you try.. the name also reflects a part of the identity. Like; do I feel acknowledged. (…) So in that way you try to involve people and tie them to the new municipality. *(R. Michels, former mayor of Winsum)*

The acknowledgement of inhabitants' perspectives on regional identity has actively been considered in the merger process through the selection of the name for the municipality. Zimmerbauer et al. (2017) provide an example of a case in Finland where place names had not been taken in account. The disappearance of place names caused dissatisfied reactions and was even interpreted as personal insult (Zimmerbauer et al., 2017). In this case the regional identity discourse was not properly being considered during a municipal merger. It can be argued that a part of the regional identity discourse in Het Hogeland has been recognized by letting inhabitants decide about the name that symbolizes their municipal region. Allowing inhabitants to participate in the decisions-making process, additionally, is a way to legitimize the newly institutionalized region. Expressed consent, in this case community support, is necessary for the acceptance of the new region (Beetham, 1991 in Terlouw & van Gorp, 2014). When talking about community involvement and communication efforts from the municipality one of the participants stated the following:

> You could say they did their job well because in essence all the necessary information was conveyed. *(*Anonymous respondent, *Film producer)*

According to the interviewees, people generally positive about the selection of the name ''Het Hogeland''. One participant linked this positive attitude to historical roots which are a shared characteristic of the region.

> But I do think it is an expression of, what I said before, that the region has a mutual coherence. *(E. van der Gugten, Assistant to the program manager)*

A name that refers to a shared historical symbol like the Hogeland might explain the general acceptance of the name. Next to this historical embeddedness of the Hogeland name, one of the participants states that the name refers to something on a deeper emotional level. Something that, for example, the former municipality of Eemsmond did not have.

> It's an appealing notion. It has something homely; Het Hogeland. It isn't something created. (…) It does also appeal to something different than only a spatial unit. *(E. Dijkhuis. Alderman of Het Hogeland and former councilor of Eemsmond)*

The name Hogeland does not only refer to relatively higher situated lands. It also symbolizes the connection inhabitants have with multiple material and immaterial things that play a role in the region.

> That just happens to be a song, that's a school, that's a museum. These are all things people feel connected with. *(E. Dijkhuis. Alderman of Het Hogeland and former councilor of Eemsmond)*

The participant tells how the Hogeland name symbolizes the memories and ties people have with things like going to school when they were young and visiting the museum. The interviewee, additionally, mentions the song ''t Hoogeland'' by Ede Staal as something that inhabitants have a connection with. The song describes characterizing landscape elements in the Hogeland and the singer's relation to it. This song is well known in the region and symbolizes the ties of inhabitants with the landscape. The quotation indicates that the Hogeland name is deeply embedded in the community. The Hogeland arguably is a narrative based in collective memory that is being mobilized to successfully facilitate support for municipal amalgamation. This substantiates the research of Raivo (2004) and Stoffelen and Vanneste (2018) in which collective memory is seen as facilitator far cross-border cooperation. Selection of the Hogeland name can be considered as the implementation of thick identity, identity which relates to traditional and sociocultural characteristics (Terlouw, 2012). Through the public poll, inhabitants have decided to 'download' the historically embedded Hogeland to collective narrative.

However, it has to be noted that the Hogeland vernacular region does not fully correspond with municipal borders of Het Hogeland. A large part of the former municipality of Bedum, for example, was not located in the geomorphological Hogeland. Despite this the inhabitants of Bedum voted Het Hogeland as municipal name.

> I believe that the majority of the inhabitants of Bedum were fine with it. And well the poll results were clear. The people that voted were involved, the rest well they see Het Hogeland really as a municipality name. But they live in Bedum and they feel Bedummer still. *(K. Rutgers, Alderwoman of Het Hogeland and former councilor of Bedum)*

The majority of the inhabitants of Bedum agreed with the name Het Hogeland. Also, in Bedum Hogeland got most votes. The quotation above, however, indicates that not all Bedummers felt heavily connected with the Hogeland name. The participant emphasized that Bedummers will remain to identify with the settlement of Bedum instead of the larger Hogeland Region. If hardened, local identities might also not disintegrate easily. Local identity in Bedum possibly is sticky to some degree which is why inhabitants do not feel the same connection with Het Hogeland. Despite this the Hogeland name seemed to be accepted in the Bedum community, if not as an identity marker then solely as an administrative name.

Not all participants had positive reactions on the selection of the municipality name. The following participant felt that connecting a name based on sociocultural connections to an administrative configuration is not desirable.

> It just feels a bit like identity theft (…) just like many Christian celebrations are linked to Germanic traditions. *(J. Hoekstra, Employee Promotie Waddenland)*

The participant stressed that connecting an administrative name with region that does not have a one on one match can be confusing. Despite the general acceptance of the Hogeland name it also has its downsides. This shows that identity politics can be a complex discussion in which a full consensus probably will never be achieved.

In the interviews I have tried to compare the selection of the Hogeland name with the municipality of Midden-Groningen, which is located in the south-east of Het Hogeland. A similar public poll for a new municipal name showed that 48% of approximately 8000 inhabitants voted for Midden-Groningen as opposed to 71% of 17.500 inhabitants for het Hogeland (Dagblad van het Noorden, 2016; Dagblad van het Noorden 2017). The turn-out in Midden-Groningen was lower despite the markedly larger population than Het Hogeland. Poll-results, additionally, show a more unanimous outcome for Het Hogeland. Because of this it can be prudently assumed that the regional identity discourse in Midden-Groningen is at least more diversified and divided between communities. Only prudent assumptions can be made because no interviews were conducted with interviewees from Midden-Groningen. The following was stated regarding the comparison between Midden-Groningen and Het Hogeland regarding shared sociocultural connections.

> I can imagine that they did not had that cultural connection. (…) While, I don't dare to say it for Midden-Groningen, but I can imagine that they had to merge different regions and that that is the reason why they selected this name. *(E. van der Gugten, Assistant to the program manager)*

> That [Midden-Groningen name] isn't really based on its own distinctive characteristic. *(E. Dijkhuis. Alderman of Het Hogeland and former councilor of Eemsmond)*

Both interviewees emphasize that they have the feeling that the Midden-Groningen name indicates that the region has a lack of sociocultural coherence. The former BMWE municipalities actively stimulated that their future name would have a stronger relation to sociocultural connections.

> Because everybody very soon said; we mustn't have a name like Midden-Groningen. Because that's a name that you don't feel connected with. It doesn't say anything. *(R. Michels, former mayor of Winsum)*

Others were more positive about the selection of a name with a name which is less embedded in the region. This interviewee stated that selecting a name that refers to a clearly bordered spatial unit might be a better option.

> Then I think that how they did it with Midden-Groningen.. I think it is more logical, completely unimaginative, but more logical. *(J. Hoekstra, Employee Promotie Waddenland)*

When sociocultural embedded are not used, the interviewee argues, then it does not seem like the municipality actively chooses names with positive associations to create community support. Doing this can, so it seems, come about as disguising the rational-economic nature of the merger.

From the naming discussion can be derived that selecting a name with historically embedded roots has been an active decision which has created relatively high levels of community support. Based on the interviews, it seems that the inhabitants of Het Hogeland generally have a positive association with the name and the material and immaterial things it symbolizes. Another active decision regarding the implementation of sociocultural connections is the logo of Het Hogeland.

7.4.2 Selecting symbols; a new logo

Sociocultural similarities potentially enable cross-border governance structures (Blasco et al., 2014). A merger process arguably is a process in which existing governance structures have to cooperate intensely in order to eventually merge into one single organization. To facilitate larger governance structures and to create inhabitant support collective narratives are mobilized in the form of thick and thin identities (Terlouw, 2009). Selecting a new municipal logo requires the consideration of embedded or newer more future oriented narratives depending on the goals of the cooperation. Selecting a new municipal logo is an example of selecting a symbol which should have a link to a collective narrative that will be marketed internally and externally.

The municipality Het Hogeland had selected five of marketing/branding agencies to develop a logo and corporate identity for the new municipality. At this point in time the municipality had already developed the position paper *Ruimte* (2017), which was to be the basis of the visual identity of Het Hogeland. After a few selection rounds strategic brand-agency *Dizain* was selected to present two logos to the executive board of the municipality and the program manager of the merger. However, in order to create community support for the merger, all inhabitants of Het Hogeland were involved to make a decision about the selection of a new logo. A public poll was organized so inhabitants could choose between the two logos designed by *Dizain* (Figure 7 and 8). The developers of the logo were initially not enthusiastic about letting inhabitants decide about the design. Their company is specialized in identity creation for organizations which is a deliberate and extensive process. They felt that that the most fitting logo had to be opted for instead of it becoming a competition about the most beautiful logo.

> Then you search for the most fitting creative translation, and you let the decision makers determine what that is. You know best what fits you. *(R. Blokzijl, Co-owner Dizain brand-agency)*

The developers, however, underline that they understood that the municipality had chosen to involve inhabitants in this process.

> In this case I understand the political forces that play a role in this. Then I get that creating inhabitant support is important. And one vision on creating inhabitant support is: then we just let the people decide, right? *(R. Blokzijl, Co-owner Dizain brand-agency)*

What this discussion shows is that the selection of narratives can be a complex process. By allowing inhabitants to participate in the decision-making process community support is created. However, like the developer, one might argue that inhabitants might decide on a more superficial basis because they were not explained an elaborate rationale behind the logo's, only a short description.

The first logo (Figure 7), which has not been chosen, is an abstract representation of spaciousness (ruimte). This logo is based on the main theme of the position paper *Ruimte* that had been developed in at start of the merger process.

> This is about space for many things. So the literal space but also the figurative space. Space for each other, space for you and the space for differences, so that there is room for differences *(R. Blokzijl, Co-owner Dizain brand-agency)*

Spaciousness is illustrated by placing wooden posts that are found on the seashore of Het Hogeland in perspective. By connecting this idea to picket posts the developer aimed to mark distance. This strong link to spaciousness is something that is frequently associated with Het Hogeland (Table 4). Space and openness partly shape the regional consciousness of inhabitants. The openness of Het Hogeland is historically embedded in the region and can thus be characterized as a thick identity element. Additionally, it can be argued that the rationale behind this logo is mainly based on a future oriented thin identity as it illustrates the aim of the new municipality to provide space for everyone to develop themselves, space to be themselves, space for creativity etc.

Fig. 7: Alternative logo Het Hogeland. (low resolution) Source: RTV Noord, 2018

Fig. 8: Selected logo Het Hogeland. Source: Stoffelen et al. (2020)

The second logo (Figure 8), which has ultimately been selected as the logo for municipality Het Hogeland is a more literal depiction of identity elements. The logo is based on the song '' t Hoogelaand'' by Ede Staal which has been mentioned before as a symbol for the regional identity discourse in Het Hogeland.

> Because we actually said: Ede Staal has fantastically articulated those characteristics of het Hogeland in this song *(R. Blokzijl, Co-owner Dizain brand-agency)*

The developers have made a visual representation of the things Ede Staal sings of and put them in a logo. Textbox 1 shows the lyrics of the song in which the highlighted parts represent elements that are illustrated in the logo (Figure 8).

t Is de lucht achter Oethoezen
t Is t torentje van Spiek
t Is de wèg van Lains noar Klooster
En deur Westpolder langs de diek

t Binnen de meulens en de moaren
t Binnen de kerken en de börgen
t Is t laand, woar ik as kind
Nog niks begreep van pien of zörgen

Dat is mien Laand.. mien hogelaand..
Het Binnen De Meuln's.. t'binn de Börgen
Dat is mien Laand.. mien hogelaand..
Het Binnen De Meuln's.. t'binn de Börgen

t Is n doevetil, n durpsstroat
t Is n olde bakkerij
t Binnen de grode boernploatsen
Van Waarvum, Oskerd, zo noar Meij

t Is de waait, t is de hoaver
t Is t koolzoad in de blui
t Is de horizon bie Roanum
Vlak noa n dunderbui
Dat is mien laand, mien Hogelaand.

t Is n mooie oavend in maai
n Kou houst doeknekt in t gruinlaand
Ik heb veur d'eerste moal verkeren
En vuil de vonken van dien haand

De wilde plannen dij'k haar
Komt sikkom niks meer van terecht
Totdat de nacht van t Hogelaand
n Donker klaid over ons legt

Dat is mien laand, mien Hogelaand

Textbox 1: Lyrics ''t Hoogelaand'' by Ede Staal (one chorus omitted). Landscape elements that have been included in the logo (Fig. 6) are highlighted. Source: Reker, 2018

The song is written and sung in the dialect of the region, het Gronings or Grunnegs. Staal sings in a variation on the dialect, the Hogelaandsters, which is specific to the north of the province. Elements from the lyrics make up a considerable part of the illustrations in the Hogeland logo.

First, elements like *'grote boernploatsen'* (large farmsteads) and *'de hoaver'* (the oats) emphasize agricultural character which is frequently associated with the Hogeland region (Table 4). High mean scores for agriculture related elements like *'akkerbouw'* (Crop farming)

and *'boerenerven'* (Farmsteads) in table 5 reaffirms that agriculture is embedded in the regional consciousness of inhabitants. Secondly, openness mentioned as the *'lucht achter Oethoezen'* (sky behind Uithuizen) and *'Horizon bie Roanum'* (horizon at Ranum) is also frequently associated with the Hogeland (Table 4). A mean score of 3,95 for openness in table 5 additionally stresses its embeddedness in the regional consciousness. Third, elements that link the built environment are frequently mentioned in the song, however, less frequently associated with the region (Table 4). Mean scores in table 5, additionally, show that inhabitants find the category *'kerken'* and *'borgen'* characterizing for the Hogeland region but less so than the agricultural and openness elements. An open-ended question in the survey shows that agricultural and built environment elements in the logo align with the Hogeland identity. This substantiates that agriculture is a key-identifier in the Hogeland. Openness was mentioned less, however, this might be explained by the fact that cannot be clearly illustrated opposed to agriculture and the built environment. The three themes have in common that they refer to a thick identity, elements which are historically embedded in the region and which might appeal to nostalgic sentiments for inhabitants. This potentially explains the general acceptance of the logo by inhabitants. A mean score of 3,8 (five-point Likert scale) indicates that inhabitants generally believe that the logo is an adequate representation of the Hogeland identity.

The logo also depicts elements which are have less ties to the history and culture of the Hogeland region. The developer of the logo explains the more future oriented rationale behind these elements.

> So, the Eemshaven, industry and the themes energy and sustainability absolutely had to be included [in the logo]. Because that may well be the future of our municipality. *(R. Blokzijl, Co-owner Dizain brand-agency)*

> We added a bridge, because a bridge symbolizes building bridges between old and new municipalities which now merge into one. *(R. Blokzijl, Co-owner Dizain brand-agency)*

> A boy with a kite can be recognized in the logo. He is a symbol for the new young municipality Het Hogeland, where there are plenty possibilities for growth and development. *(R. Blokzijl, Co-owner Dizain brand-agency)*

These future oriented elements are sporadically associated with the Hogeland in the survey results. However, these elements symbolize the goals of Het Hogeland as described in *Ruimte* (2017). Future oriented symbols in the Hogeland narrative link to what Terlouw and van Gorp (2014) describe as a thin identity, elements which are more of a rational economic nature. These elements, unlike thick identity elements, are not embedded in the regional consciousness of inhabitants. They, however, serve to justify the development of energy related industry in the Eemshaven and to stimulate the image of unity of the new municipality. The thin identity arguably is only weakly connected to the thick identity of Het Hogeland. This might explain why inhabitants relatively often mention that the child with the kite (N= 31) and that windmills (N=32) are elements that do not align with the Hogeland identity. The next-most mentioned elements, for example, were the sailboat (N=14) and churches (N=8). The sailboat in the top left corner of the logo (Figure 8) might be explained by the inward orientation of the municipality and that sailing on the Waddensea is not a common activity. This is more related to sailing and shrimp fishing on the Lauwersmeer. Coverage of the respondents is relatively low in the far west of Het Hogeland were the Lauwersmeer is located. This, however, might be due to the low amount of settlements in this region. Inhabitants from other parts of the Hogeland maybe do not identify with the relatively isolated fishing community in the west of the municipality.

In case of the logo selection for the Hogeland, the municipality in cooperation of its inhabitants have actively chosen to incorporate symbols which are deeply embedded in the Hogeland identity. Based on the survey by Stoffelen et al. (2020) similarities can be identified between the logo and the regional consciousness of Hogeland inhabitants. Based on the interviews it can be stated, similar to the naming-process of Het Hogeland, that including inhabitants in the selection of a logo signified a step towards societal acceptance of the new administration. Inclusion of sociocultural connections like the historically embeddedness of agriculture and openness has potentially strengthened acceptance by inhabitants. Future oriented elements in the logo, however, are only weakly connected to the regional consciousness of inhabitants.

7.4.3 Coat of Arms

The third example of practical incorporation of regional identity is the new coat of arms which, in anticipation of the merger, was adopted in November 2018. Before practically designing the coat of arms, historical associations from the former BMWE municipalities were consulted. A committee consisting of the BMWE mayors and representatives of the historical associations ultimately selected a narrative for the coat of arms. The proposed design was, subsequently, approved by the necessary institutions. Involving historical associations, similar to including inhabitants in the logo and naming process, was opted for to create community support. Additionally, these associations have most knowledge about the history of the region and thus about possible identity markers which could be illustrated.

> Because they have been living here for centuries, not the people of course but their families. They know what they are talking about and they also find it very important. *(*Anonymous respondent*, Filmproducer)*

By involving the historical associations, the municipality gave off the signal that a historical narrative should be the starting point for the design. The Hogeland coats of arms (Figure 9) depicts a stepping horse with a rider and a lady sitting sideways. In the sky above the rider a seven-pointed star can be seen. This part of the coat of arms refers to the historical coat of arms of the Hunsingo region found on a signet from the 13th century. By selecting this basis for the coat of arms the municipality embeds their symbology in a historical narrative that deeply rooted in the region. Additionally, the former BMWE municipalities have the Hunsingo narrative in common, making it something that unites them. The arched ground beneath the rider refers to the dwelling mounds that characterize the region (Documented explanation coat of arms, interviewee M. Sorgdrager). Respondents averagely associated dwelling mounds with the region (N=38) (Table 4). Moreover, they indicated that dwelling mounds were averagely characterizing for the region with a mean score of 3,75 (Table 5), The survey indicates that the connection of dwelling mounds to the regional consciousness of inhabitants is not particularly strong, but not weak either. It most probably has been selected because historically dwelling mounds have played a significant role in shaping the landscape of the region. Two crossed wheat ears (Figure 9) refer the deeply embedded agricultural character of the region (Documented explanation coat of arms, interviewee M. Sorgdrager).

The design of the Hogeland coat of arms is strongly embedded in shared, mostly historical, narratives. However, critique during the design discussions about the coat of arms was that no modern elements were included.

> The historical association of de Marne said that they would have liked to have something more modern, and there was a bit of a laugh about that. But listening to other peoples' reactions it was actually a valid point. *(*nonymous respondent*, Filmproducer)*

No concessions were made in terms of including modern elements. Historical elements with a general positive association have been uploaded to the new Hogeland narrative (Terlouw & van Gorp, 2014).

Fig. 9: Design of the coat of arms on the chain of office. Source: Zilver Is Spreken, 2020

7.4.4 Chain of office

The last example of mobilization sociocultural connections and symbols is the chain of office, made by Marjanne Sorgdrager (Figure 10). The chain is a symbol that represents the official authority of a mayor. The connection of the chain of office to the inhabitants is weaker and

Fig. 10: Het Hogeland chain of office

Source: Zilver Is Spreken, 2020

less clear than the other symbols that have been discussed so far. However, the chain and the rationale behind the design can be an indicator of what a municipality stands for, which narrative they aim to tell. Het Hogeland did not choose a classical design with historically embed elements like mills and dwelling mounds.

> Actually, this was symbolic for us then, giving off the signal that this stands for the urge to innovate and for that space we wanted to give for development. That is why we did not opt for a classical chain. *(R. Michels, former mayor of Winsum)*

The municipality actively opted for a future oriented ''*thin*'' design that are linked to the goals that were set in *Ruimte* (2017). Historically embedded elements were actively deselected. Four shields on the chain have illustrations which have distinctive rationales that relate to the future oriented narrative of Het Hogeland. The illustrations represent the different roles a mayor has in a municipality.

The first illustration is one of a collection of people (Figure 11, A). This illustrates the attentive involvement of the mayor with inhabitants. This illustration goes in on the social and connective function of a mayor.

> (…) provide safety, appreciation, and a sense of coherence. landscape (*M. Sorgdrager,Gold/silver smith)*

The second shield has an illustration of a slipknot (Figure 11, B). A slipknot can be untied in rapidly if needed. In this case, the slipknot represents quick intervention by the mayor when needed. It indicates that a mayor must be capable of leading a municipality effectively.

The third shield shows a tree (Figure 11, C). The tree is symbolic for overview, authority and the guardian role of a mayor.

> You can lean on it and you are being protected by it. That is the power. (*M. Sorgdrager,Gold/silver smith)*

The last illustration is breaking of waves (Figure 11, D). The rationale behind this that the breaking of waves represents reciprocity, the search for cooperation, giving initiatives a chance and believing in development. This reflects the connective role of the mayor. To connect people from social networks like associations, villages, and companies within the municipality.

Fig. 11: Images on shields chain of office. Source: Zilver Is Spreken, 2020

A clear distinction can be found between the coat of arms and the chain of office, two symbols who are closely connected. The first illustrates elements which have a clear historical embeddedness and while the latter illustrates a more future oriented abstract narrative. The chain of office has a weak relation to the regional consciousness of inhabitants.

7.5 Cohesion through shared connections

Shared sociocultural connections have been particularly important on specific moments and for specific stakeholders. This is primarily visible in creating community support for the merger. Especially the border correction in Middag-Humsterland acknowledged the differing identity discourse that was in place. By acknowledging this preemptively, the BMWE was ahead of large-scale resistance like described by Zimmerbauer et al. (2012). In the rest of the region the municipal merger at first was characterized as an administrative discussion that did not have a lot of connection with the day to day life of inhabitants. However, when the municipality opted for including inhabitants in the decision making process regarding some sociocultural aspects of the merger inhabitants became more involved. This arguably also benefitted the acceptance of the new municipality among inhabitants.

> But actually, that whole administrative discussion that we were busy with. I wonder to what degree that concerns inhabitants. But when it comes along in the shape of what name does it [the municipality] has to get then then.. then it started to live. *(E. Dijkhuis. Alderman of Het Hogeland and former councilor of Eemsmond)*

Inhabitants of Het Hogeland were able to have a say in the selection of symbols for their new municipality. Community involvement contributed to the acceptance of these symbols and the narrative of the new municipality. It can be argued that the strongest link to the role of sociocultural connections in the facilitation of the Hogeland merger is found in relation to community involvement. On an organizational level more abstract terms of ruralness and societal issues are involved as connecting narratives. Inhabitants, however, selected symbols that are more closely linked to regional identity discourse that is in place like the song by Ede Staal, the Hunsingo region and Hogeland name. This argues in favor of the research of Williams

and Stewart (1998) who emphasize the relevance of emotive human-place relations in the management of spaces.

The research of Stoffelen and Vanneste (2018) indicates that mobilization of shared history can facilitate cross-border cooperation in a tourism context. Among other things, present research aims to approach how mobilization of shared history narratives facilitated cooperation in a municipal merger context. When looking at the present municipality an interviewee states the following regarding the administrative cohesiveness of the organization.

> It really is a ''we'' feeling. We of Het Hogeland. Without a nationalistic connotation, because you should not take it too far. But you just feel that there is a connection. *(E. Dijkhuis. Alderman of Het Hogeland and former councilor of Eemsmond)*

This quotation indicates that the Hogeland is a shared narrative that connects people working in the municipality. Despite that the political landscape has changed several times over time, inhabitants as well as municipal staff remain to have a shared notion of the Hogeland. It can be argued that this identity discourse, and to a lesser extent that of Hunsingo, facilitates cooperation in the present municipality. This shows links to the research of Stoffelen and Vanneste (2018) who argue that shared historical narratives potentially facilitate cross-border cooperation. However, in this case border have dissolved into a larger institutionalized region.

7.6 Tourism coalitions and the selection of narratives

Internal and external marketing were already mentioned in relation to the merger process. In line with this is the tourism sector which has a prominent role in the internal and external marketing of narratives. An interview with an employee of regional promotion organization *Promotie Waddenland* enables the comparison between narratives used tourism cooperation and narratives used in the Hogeland merger.

Tourism and entrepreneurial networks in Het Hogeland are presently undergoing changes as a consequence of the recent municipal merger. Within these networks new coalitions are formed which is actively stimulated by the municipality.

> Well as municipality we actively organized meetings [about tourism and entrepreneurial cooperation]. Actually, in order to give the first push. *(K. Rutgers, Alderwoman of Het Hogeland and former councilor of Bedum)*

The institutionalization of Het Hogeland has had a positive influence on the connection between settlements and regions within the municipality.

> (…) so that connection is being sought after by entrepreneurial organizations but also by cultural organizations. (…) So actually, you get more connections between those larger settlements. *(R. Michels, former mayor of Winsum*

Within the borders of the municipality there are three major promotion and marketing organizations: *Promotie Waddenland, VVV Bedum* and *Top van Groningen*. These organizations are tasked with attracting tourists and facilitating tourism activities in their operation area. Municipality Het Hogeland which financially contributes to these organizations has communicated to these organizations that they have to merge into one tourism marketing organization. A new Hogeland DMO would imply that *Promotie Waddenland* and *VVV Bedum* would dissolve into one organization. *Top van Groningen*, which is mainly active in municipality Eemsdelta will stop to operate in the former municipality of Eemsmond. A joint Hogeland DMO could potentially benefit the municipality. Terlouw (2016) argues that collective marketing of narratives and cooperation between stakeholders is instrumental for the construction of legitimate administrations.

Relevant for the discussion on sociocultural connections in relation to cross-border cooperation is to study how the Hogeland merger will most likely influence tourism promotion narratives internally and externally. Promoted narratives by *Promotie Waddenland* are based on key-experiences which align with the narratives promoted by larger promotion/marketing organizations like *Marketing Groningen* and *VisitWadden*. The following list are short descriptions of the eight key-experiences which a tourist should have when visiting the region (personal communication, J. Hoekstra, 2020):

1. Visit an island or the coast
2. Walk on the sea bottom
3. Enjoy the unique, dynamic Wadden nature
4. Taste a typical honest Wadden product
5. Discover the most beautiful fishing villages and their maritime history
6. Get inspired by artists from the Wadden
7. Experience the darkest and most silent nights in the Netherlands
8. Experience the history and oldest cultural landscape of Western Europe

The key-experiences are primarily used in external promotion to attract tourist to the region and have a strong focus on the maritime character of the region and its relation to the Waddensea. This contradicts the agricultural narrative that respondents emphasize. The employee from *Promotion Waddenland* emphasizes the maritime narrative is opted for because the Wadden are known widespread opposed to the cultural landscape of the Hogeland region.

> When you look internally.. in Groningen everybody knows what the Hogeland is. However, when you look at the Netherlands, in the Netherlands everybody does know the Wadden, but not the Hogeland *(J. Hoekstra, Employee Promotie Waddenland)*

Because relatively unfamiliarity of the Hogeland in the rest of the Netherlands, the Wadden is actively used to attract visitors externally. The employee of *Promotie Waddenland* additionally argues that this is one of the reasons why Hogeland is not preferred as name for the new DMO. She, however, also stresses that the new DMO should have a name that resonates with the whole region and the entrepreneurs from the whole region should be able to identify with it, referring to entrepreneurs that are located more inland. However, results from the interviews and survey indicated that there are shared narratives in the region (i.e. Hogeland, Hunsingo) which a new DMO could potentially be named after. However, external marketing remains to play a relevant role in this process.

There is a marked difference in external and internal promotion by *Promotie Waddenland* which substantiates the distinction between promotion, marketing and branding by Boisen et al. (2018). Externally promotion is mainly focused on attracting visitors. Internal promotion by *Promotie Waddenland* can be characterized as branding (Boisen et al., 2018) and is focused

on reputation management and the influencing of attitudes of inhabitants. An example is the last key-experience that is refers to the cultural landscape.

> When you talk about those key-experiences, then it's really focused on visitors [external]. But what is internally focused are regional products (…) that appeals massively to being proud of your own region *(J. Hoekstra, Employee Promotie Waddenland)*

Maritime related elements are less promoted internally than externally. However, internally promotion and tourism activities are related to the agricultural character of the region. *Promotie Waddenland* opted for this because this appeals to the regional pride of inhabitants which corresponds with the definition of branding by Boisen et al. (2018). Internal branding showed a strong link to the general regional consciousness of inhabitants. Paasi (2013) argues that regional identities have become prime planning and marketing instruments to improve regional competitiveness. Differences in internal and external promotion in Het Hogeland indicates that there is a mismatch between externally promoted identity narratives and the regional consciousness of inhabitants in the Hogeland. Saxena et al., (2008) argue that in order to provide sustainable sources of income, new socio-economic activities, such as tourism and leisure, should be rooted in existing social, economic and cultural structures. Based on this assumption the mismatch between internal and external promotion in Het Hogeland could potentially prove to be unsustainable. This could be avoided by aligning and adjusting the external maritime narrative to embedded narratives like agriculture and openness. Interestingly, elements like openness and quietness which are strongly associated with the Hogeland are actively left out in internal promotion because they should appeal less to regional pride like the production of characteristic products.

> It is so peaceful here, it is so quiet here, the views are so wide. Well the inhabitants of the region think that is normal. *(J. Hoekstra, Employee Promotie Waddenland)*

Based on frequent inhabitant association with openness (Table 4) and the relatively high mean score (3,95) for *''Grootschalige openheid''* (Table 5) it can be argued that openness and

quietness are a part of a rooted cultural structure (Saxena, 2008) and thus can potentially serve as sustainable source for internal promotion as well.

8. Discussion

8.1 Results

The results of this thesis indicate that regional identity has played a small yet significant role during and before the Hogeland merger. Mobilization of historically embedded narratives and creation of symbology in the Hogeland merger showed to most relevant (i) only in some phases of the merger (i.g. run-up); (ii) to create community support; (iii) as argument for a particular merger configuration. Before expanding on these three findings, the results will be discussed in relation to the theoretical framework.

Inhabitant resistance, expressed as discontent, during and before the merger was mainly based on rational-economic objections (i.g. accessibility of municipal counters, waste collection, municipal taxes). Objections that transcended rational economic perspectives were primarily observed in areas within the former municipalities that had a different historical background. The Hogeland case shows markedly less resistance based on sociocultural connections compared to the case of Nurmo, studied by Zimmerbauer et al. (2012). First, this might be explained by the preemptive action by the BMWE municipalities, allowing the inhabitants of Middag-Humsterland to decide over their own fate. Active community involvement, contradicts the argument of Paasi (2011) that power dynamics do not get much attention in region building processes. The Hogeland case shows that power dynamics are considered in the decision-making process. Selection of narratives from thick and thin identities is a negotiation (Terlouw & van Gorp, 2014), which in this case has been relatively equal. This had positive effects on the legitimization of the new municipality. Second, despite the stickiness of Middag-Humsterland, this research showed that there was a gradual identification with the Middag-Humsterland region on one hand and the Hogeland region on the other, showing that borders are indeed porous and overlapping in terms of identification (Prokkola et al., 2015).

Low levels of resistance might also be explained by the homogenous character of the region in terms of rooted narratives and the shape of the landscape. Interviewees indicated that most of the region has shared historical, cultural, and geomorphological characteristics. Historical and cultural narratives, first, refer to shared notions of ''*Het Hogeland*''. Based on the interviews it can be stated that Hogeland is an identifier for many inhabitants and administrators as it calls upon a sense of regional pride and it is commonly used name for organizations, associations. This provides proof for the research of Maffesoli (1996) who argues that the region remains an important identifier, despite intensive globalization processes. Second, interviewees indicate that the physical characteristics of the landscape (i.e. infrastructure, type of agricultural parcels) influence the identification process of inhabitants of Het Hogeland. Except for parts of Bedum, the physical characteristics of the Hogeland region are more or less homogenous, potentially shaping the regional identity. This argues in line with a territorial perspective on regional identity (Jones & MacLeod, 2004). From this perspective the region is a container of regional identity, thus shaping the identification process in within a clearly bordered area.

Shared characteristics of the BMWE municipalities were especially relevant in the configuration discussion. Similarities were extra emphasized when the municipalities decided for the recent configuration. Based on the data it cannot be stated that it facilitated cooperation between the organizations during the merger process. This differentiates the results from the research of Stoffelen and Vanneste (2018) who argue that shared historical narratives potentially facilitate cross-border cooperation. This research did, however, show a facilitating role of shared historical and cultural narratives for the creation of community support and legitimization of the Hogeland municipality. Involving the Hogeland community during the active mobilization of sociocultural connections and symbols in the merger process, contributed to the acceptance of the institutionalized region. Acceptance and expressed consent of inhabitants contributes to the legitimacy of region (Beetham, 1991). Mainly community involvement during the selection of a new municipality name and a new logo have contributed to acceptance of inhabitants. The new coat of arms, a symbol to potentially identify with, has played a smaller role during the merger. So, despite being embedded in historical narratives, it contributed to a lesser extent to facilitation of the municipal merger. Presence of cross-border cultural connections does not automatically result in the bridging of

administrative borders, but it can have a facilitating role (Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2018). By selecting the ''Hogeland'' name and the new logo (Figure 8) the municipality in cooperation with inhabitants have actively chosen historically and culturally embedded narratives, which contributed to acceptance, legitimization, and arguably low levels of resistance. This could not have been possible without historically shared narratives, like Hunsingo and the Hogeland.

The political and rational-economic nature of the municipal merger sometimes seemed to contrast strongly with historical and identity narratives that were actively implemented in some phases of the merger. During the merger process there was an emphasis on the organizational aspects within the municipalities. This might be explained by the fact that fusion of four organizations is a complex process which requires most of the attention from administrators. Organizational aspects were generally perceived as more important.

8.2 Limitations

During the interviews I found that sometimes it was hard to get on one line about regional identity in the merger process with the interviewees. Differentiating between regional identity, regional consciousness, personal perspectives, and perspectives of other stakeholders as perceived by the interviewee was sometimes hard. For example, sometimes interviewees thought we were discussing differences in organizational culture instead of differences in regional identity characteristics between municipalities. Confusing terminology has also been observed during the analysis of the survey results. Windmills were relatively frequently mentioned (N=50 of 164 respondents) to align with the Hogeland identity. This is remarkable because they were also mentioned relatively frequently (N=32 of 164 respondents) as element that does not align with the Hogeland identity. A possible explanation for this might be that inhabitants do not differentiate between old mills (pel-graanmolens) and wind turbines (modern windmolens) or because wind turbines are not yet embedded in the regional consciousness of all inhabitants. Another issue during the interviews was determining whether participants were arguing from a relational or territorial perspective. These nuances following from the complex nature of regional identity made that the transcripts had to be interpreted extra carefully in the coding phase.

The survey by Stoffelen et al. (2020) that was used in comparison with the interview data also needs to be reflected on in relation to this research. The survey asks respondents on the degree of identification with landscape characteristics and marketing narratives in the form of the logo, an example which has been thoroughly discussed in this research. Present research has shown that inhabitants identify relatively strongly (Mean score = 3,8) with the new logo of Het Hogeland. This research, however, focused on the mobilization of symbols during and before the merger in 2019. In the time after the merger inhabitants might have become more used to new logo, which might has resulted in a distorted image of the acceptance of the logo during the merger. It can, however, be safely concluded that the logo is generally accepted in the Hogeland community.

9. Conclusion and recommendations

9.1 Conclusion

This thesis aimed to study and assess the role of regional identity discourse during and before the municipal merger process of Het Hogeland. First, the agricultural character of the region, which was underlined by the survey results, has contributed to the current configuration of the municipality. A shared regional notion facilitated the formation phase of the Hogeland. Second, retelling shared historical notions like the Hogeland and Hunsingo has embedded the new municipality in social discourse, potentially avoiding resistance. Community involvement in the active mobilization of sociocultural connections and symbols by the municipality has potentially contributed to the acceptance and legitimization of municipality Het Hogeland. Finally, it can be argued that the mobilization regional identity played a relatively small but significant role during and before the municipal merger of Het Hogeland. Administrative and organizational characteristics take up most of time and energy in the merger process. However, shared sociocultural connections have been instrumental for the creation of inhabitant support.

Findings in this research add to the debate about regional identity in municipal contexts by focusing on the enabling role of regional identity instead of constraining elements, like resistance. Instead of weakened ties with municipal configurations like described by

Zimmerbauer et al. (2012), the Hogeland case has shown that new regions can actually become meaningful to inhabitants if shared historical and cultural connections are successfully mobilized. Stickiness of old regions (Zimmerbauer et al., 2017) can thus serve as building blocks if actants with power include it in the process of merging administrations.

The facilitating role of active mobilization of shared sociocultural connections in the Hogeland merger can be an example for municipal mergers in general in terms of acceptance and legitimization. Moreover, the case shows that the involvement of local communities is instrumental for this process. It is not argued that mobilization of sociocultural connections is inherently a blueprint for success. First, there need to be historical and cultural connections that can be mobilized in the first place. Absence of shared historical connections potentially is less problematic when future oriented thin identities are actively implemented. Second, the relation between people and regions is nuanced, sensitive and subjective. This makes political mobilization of regional identity at least complicated and potentially vulnerable for resistance. Despite this, municipal mergers should take in account shared cultural connections as it potentially facilitates of the emergence of meaningful new regions.

9.2 Recommendations

A variety of methods have been used for this research. Through these methods some assumptions have been made on the role of regional identity discourse in the Hogeland merger. However, for future research it would additionally be interesting to ask inhabitants directly about; (i) resistance to the merger; (ii) specific implementations of sociocultural or historical connections; (iii) collective memories through interviews or a survey. Including in-depth interviews with inhabitants like Zimmerbauer et al. (2012) would give a more nuanced view on resistance discourse during the merger. Instead, this research predominantly based the perceived levels of resistance on the experiences of interviewees. Due to the relative sensitive nature of resistance discourse, especially in relation to identity, a direct survey or interview with inhabitants might have been more suitable. This links to the last point of reflection. Hoving (2010) questions the homogeneity of the Hogeland region in terms of regional identity. However, based on the interviews with administrators and experts, this thesis shows a relatively homogenous perception of the regional consciousness by

inhabitants. I believe that this research was successful in describing in describing characterizing elements that shape the regional consciousness, however, in-depth interviews with inhabitants might also in this case result in a more nuanced and saturated image of the identity discourse in Het Hogeland.

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Agriculture

170 Quotations:

4:4 wuivende akkers (80:94) / 4:6 vette kleigrond (63:77) / 4:11 Polders (134:140) / 4:12 akkerbouw (162:170) / 4:21 weilanden (223:231) / 4:24 polder (302:307) / 4:25 Platteland (273:282) / 4:28 poders (330:335) / 4:30 Boerderijen (364:374) / 4:31 weilanden (377:385) / 4:34 boeren (432:437) / 4:35 weiden (440:445) / 4:37 Boerderijen (463:473) / 4:39 akkers (484:489) / 4:40 landwegen (492:500) / 4:41 Platteland (505:514) / 4:42 boeren (517:522) / 4:43 akkers (535:540) / 4:45 boerderijen (554:564) / 4:47 weiland (594:600) / 4:48 boerderijen (603:613) / 4:49 boerderijen (627:637) / 4:50 Weiland (618:624) / 4:52 Platteland (668:677) / 4:53 Boerderijen (680:690) / 4:54 akkerbouw (693:701) / 4:56 weiland (734:740) / 4:57 boerderijen (743:753) / 4:59 Boeren (775:780) / 4:66 veeteelt (851:858) / 4:68 landbouw (861:868) / 4:75 Molens (946:951) / 4:76 boerderijen (962:972) / 4:77 Landbouw (988:995) / 4:78 platteland (1014:1023) / 4:79 Boeren (1028:1033) / 4:80 platteland (1052:1061) / 4:81 Boerderijen (1066:1076) / 4:82 platteland (1079:1088) / 4:83 Boerderijen (1109:1119) / 4:84 platteland (1130:1139) / 4:85 Boerderijen (1152:1162) / 4:87 Boerderijen (1239:1249) / 4:88 Boerderijen (1278:1288) / 4:89 platteland (1291:1300) / 4:90 Platteland (1329:1338) / 4:91 boerderijen (1375:1385) / 4:94 boeren (1477:1482) / 4:95 Platteland (1631:1640) / 4:96 Boerderijen (1643:1653) / 4:98 verkavelingspatronen (1656:1675) / 4:99 boerderijen (1754:1764) / 4:100 boerderijen (1847:1857) / 4:101 boerderijen (1886:1896) / 4:103 weilanden (1915:1923) / 4:104 akkerbouw (1964:1972) / 4:105 platteland (1988:1997) / 4:106 boerderij (2046:2054) / 4:107 Boerderijen (2070:2080) / 4:108 trekkers (2083:2090) / 4:109 akkers (2093:2098) / 4:110 vieze wegen (2101:2111) / 4:111 Boerderijen (2116:2126) / 4:112 boeren akkers (2193:2205) / 4:113 Platteland (2225:2234) / 4:114 polder (2245:2250) / 4:115 boerenbedrijf (2290:2302) / 4:116 Veel akkers (2345:2355) / 4:117 boerderijen (2358:2368) / 4:118 trekker (2379:2385) / 4:119 polder/akkerbouw (2439:2454) / 4:120 Landbouw (2486:2493) / 4:122 vee (2503:2505) / 4:123 polder (2540:2545) / 4:126 agrarisch (2746:2754) / 4:127 Landbouw (2774:2781) / 4:128 boeren (2793:2798) / 4:129 boeren (2887:2892) / 4:130 landbouw (2948:2955) / 4:131 Landbouw (3001:3008) / 4:132 boeren (3011:3016) / 4:133 landweggetjes (3075:3087) / 4:134 Weiland (3125:3131) / 4:135 weilanden (3168:3176) / 4:136 Platteland (3201:3210) / 4:137 Weiland (3253:3259) / 4:138 mooie boerderijen (3314:3330) / 4:139 Platteland (3414:3423) / 4:140 boerderijen (3434:3444) / 4:141 akkerbouw (3447:3455) / 4:142 landelijk (3480:3488) / 4:143 boerderijen (3531:3541) / 4:144 boerderijen (3664:3674) / 4:145 akkerlad (3712:3719) / 4:146 boeren (3766:3771) / 4:147 veel weilanden (3774:3787) / 4:148 weilanden (3807:3815) / 4:149 Akkers (3834:3839) / 4:150 veeteelt (3865:3872) / 4:151 Veeteelt (3877:3884) / 4:152 weilanden (3902:3910) / 4:153 Platteland (3921:3930) / 4:154 stinkende mestdamp (3933:3950) / 4:155 boeren (3981:3986) / 4:156 het platteland (4011:4024) / 4:157 veel landbouw (4045:4057) / 4:158 veel boeren (4089:4099) / 4:159 akkerbouw (4221:4229) / 4:160 polders (4406:4412) / 4:161 boerderij (4442:4450) / 4:164 Boeren (4574:4579) / 4:165 Landbouw (4615:4622) / 4:166 boerderij (4731:4739) / 4:167 gewassen (4742:4749) / 4:168 Platteland (4755:4764) / 4:170 polder (4844:4849) / 4:171 boerderijen (4852:4862) / 4:172 akkers (5004:5009) / 4:173 polders (5159:5165) / 4:174 polderlandschap (5193:5207) / 4:175 boerderijen (5210:5220) / 4:176 Polders (5288:5294) / 4:177 akkerbouw (5317:5325) / 4:178 veehouderij (5607:5617) / 4:179 Landweggetjes (5513:5525) / 4:180 boeren (5673:5678) / 4:181 boerderijen (5708:5718) / 4:182 Akkers (5692:5697) / 4:183 akkers (5644:5649) / 4:184 polders (5794:5800) / 4:185 landbouw (5824:5831) / 4:186 Landschap (5909:5917) / 4:187 Akkbouw (5947:5953) / 4:188 slootjes (5964:5971) / 4:189 boerderijen (6016:6026) / 4:190 polders (6068:6074) / 4:191 Weiland (6149:6155) / 4:192 akkerbouw (6166:6174) / 4:193 boeren (6183:6188) / 4:194 weilanden (6212:6220) / 4:195 boerderijen (6223:6233) / 4:196 akkerbouw (6254:6262) / 4:197 landbouw (6291:6298) / 4:198 Boeren (6387:6392) / 4:199 veel weiland (6525:6536) / 4:200 Landbouw (6581:6588) / 4:201 boerderijen (6667:6677) / 4:202 boerderijen (6708:6718) / 4:203 weilanden (6740:6748) / 4:204 Platteland (6754:6763) / 4:207 Boerderijen (6799:6809) / 4:208 landerijen (6818:6827) / 4:209 akkerbouw (6906:6914) / 4:210 Veeteelt (6926:6933) / 4:211 akkers (6945:6950) / 4:212 Boerenlandschap (6964:6978) / 4:213 trekkers (6996:7003) / 4:214 Weilanden (7009:7017) / 4:215 Landbouw (7097:7104) / 4:216 weilanden (7143:7151) / 4:217 akkerbouw (7154:7162) / 4:218 boerderijen (7190:7200) / 4:227 Weilanden (4793:4801) / 4:271 rechte landstukken (2129:2146) / 4:385 vlakkeland (4332:4341) / 4:396 Weilanden (4490:4498) / 4:400 alleen landbouw (4582:4596) / 4:451 akkers (5393:5398) / 4:461 akkers (5599:5604) / 4:520 boerenland (6874:6883)

Animals

11 Quotations:

4:46 koeien (586:591) / 4:223 koeien (1044:1049) / 4:224 koeien (1091:1096) / 4:230 koeien (1122:1127) / 4:332 koeien (3243:3248) / 4:345 koeien (3544:3549) / 4:350 koeien (3624:3629) / 4:371 veel dieren (4060:4071) / 4:418 koeien (4836:4841) / 4:492 koeien (6309:6314) / 4:524 koeien (6981:6986)

Built_Environment

67 Quotations:

4:26 kerken (294:299) / 4:29 wierdedorpen (349:360) / 4:33 Grote landhuizen (414:429) / 4:61 molens (791:796) / 4:67 uithuizen (871:879) / 4:221 molens (1006:1011) / 4:222 molens (1036:1041) / 4:238 molens (1252:1257) / 4:242 molens (1303:1308) / 4:243 steenfabrieken (1311:1324) / 4:245 grote vrijstaande huizen (1349:1372) / 4:250 Het Hogeland College (1502:1521) / 4:255 steenfabrieken (1678:1691) / 4:267 molens (1907:1912) / 4:274 kerktorentjes (2208:2220) / 4:284 dorpen (2395:2400) / 4:294 Kerk (2560:2563) / 4:298 monumentale gebouwen (2629:2648) / 4:299 kerken (2682:2687) / 4:301 dorpjes (2673:2679) / 4:303 dorpjes (2718:2724) / 4:306 kleine dorpen (2757:2769) / 4:307 dorpjes (2784:2790) / 4:308 Groningen (2801:2809) / 4:311 kerktorens (2844:2853) / 4:328 Dorpen (3160:3165) / 4:331 molens (3233:3238) / 4:333 dorpen (3262:3267) / 4:336 Dorpen (3335:3340) / 4:351 kleine dorpjes (3632:3645) / 4:354 terpdorpen (3700:3709) / 4:355 kerktorens (3722:3731) / 4:357 rust (3743:3746) / 4:364 kleine dorpen (3850:3862) / 4:365 kleien dorpen (3887:3899) / 4:370 Het Hogeland College (3989:4008) / 4:381 oude kerken (4295:4305) / 4:387 borgen (4367:4372) / 4:390 Molen (4424:4428) / 4:393 dorpjes (4464:4470) / 4:397 kleine dorpen (4509:4521) / 4:401 HHC (4599:4601) / 4:420 kleine dorpen (4876:4888) / 4:442 oude kerken (5260:5270) / 4:460 Molens (5583:5588) / 4:473 Groningse bouwstijl (5974:5992) / 4:485 College (6194:6200) / 4:486 dorpjes (6203:6209) / 4:490 Kleine dorpen (6276:6288) / 4:491 borgen (6301:6306) / 4:495 dorp (6368:6371) / 4:503 borgen (6590:6596) / 4:504 t'Zielhoes (6599:6608) / 4:514 herenhuizen (6721:6731) / 4:522 dorpjes (6936:6942) / 4:525 molen (6989:6993) / 4:528 mooie dorpen (7034:7045) / 4:529 kerken (7060:7065) / 4:532 kerken (7107:7112) / 4:534 molens (7165:7170) / 4:550 Kruisweg (809:816) / 4:592 windmolens (3140:3149) / 4:613 Windmolens (4132:4141) / 4:645 windmolens (5721:5730) / 4:666 museum (6360:6365) / 4:667 School (6352:6357) / 4:675 windmolens (6566:6575)

Experience

29 Quotations:

4:556 authentiek (1538:1547) / 4:557 bescheiden (1550:1559) / 4:558 kleurrijk (1562:1570) / 4:581 Mooi (2699:2702) / 4:582 oud (2704:2707) / 4:584 koud (2895:2898) / 4:587 gezellig (2969:2976) / 4:588 authentiek (2987:2996) / 4:589 echt Gronings (3024:3037) / 4:594 ons kent ons (3212:3224) / 4:597 vrijheid (3356:3363) / 4:598 kleurloos (3390:3398) / 4:600 schoon (3472:3477) / 4:604 Mooi (3599:3602) / 4:606 saai (3658:3661) / 4:608 schoon (3818:3823) / 4:614 vrijheid (4152:4159) / 4:630 mooi (5136:5139) / 4:633 saai (5343:5346) / 4:634 kaal (5349:5352) / 4:651 Belangwekkend (5855:5867) / 4:652 bijzonder (5870:5878) / 4:653 uitstraling (5881:5891) / 4:654 vitaliteit (5894:5903) / 4:660 saai (6128:6131) / 4:662 zon (6141:6143) / 4:664 mooi (6343:6346) / 4:671 saai (6472:6476) / 4:674 schoon (6558:6563)

Landscape

121 Quotations:

4:22 Dijken (241:246) / 4:60 dijken (783:788) / 4:64 dijk (824:827) / 4:121 landelijk (2529:2537) / 4:125 grote velden (2607:2618) / 4:220 dijken (998:1003) / 4:229 dijken (1099:1104) / 4:231 dijken (1142:1147) / 4:234 dijken (1193:1198) / 4:244 dijken (1341:1346) / 4:259 dijken (1767:1772) / 4:265 dijken (1869:1874) / 4:275 dijken (2237:2242) / 4:278 Dijkgat (2260:2266) / 4:282 dijken (2371:2376) / 4:289 dijken (2431:2436) / 4:302 Grote landschappen (2653:2670) / 4:317 dijken (2979:2984) / 4:325 dijken (3106:3111) / 4:363 dijken (3842:3847) / 4:367 dijk (3965:3968) / 4:374 dijken (4144:4149) / 4:379 dijken (4232:4237) / 4:388 dijken (4375:4380) / 4:394 Dijken (4456:4461) / 4:417 Dijken (4828:4833) / 4:419 Dijken (4868:4873) / 4:427 dijken (5012:5017) / 4:439 Dijken (5185:5190) / 4:453 Dijk (5387:5390) / 4:455 dijken (5442:5447) / 4:466 dijken (5700:5705) / 4:467 dijken (5786:5791) / 4:476 dijken (6050:6055) / 4:489 dijken (6265:6270) / 4:510 dijken (6648:6653) / 4:523 dijken (6953:6958) / 4:538 groen (120:124) / 4:539 wierden (153:159) / 4:540 klei (266:269) / 4:541 wierden (249:255) / 4:542 wierden (285:291) / 4:543 kleigrond (338:346) / 4:544 wierden (403:409) / 4:545 Planten (545:551) / 4:546 Gras (580:583) / 4:548 wierden (640:646) / 4:549 Wierden (725:731) / 4:551 bossen (953:959) / 4:553 groen (1452:1456) / 4:559 Terpen (1575:1580) / 4:561 Kleigrond (1735:1743) / 4:562 terpen (1745:1751) / 4:563 Wierden (1777:1783) / 4:564 glooiende wierden (1828:1844) / 4:565 wierden (1877:1883) / 4:566 wierden (1945:1951) / 4:567 Landschap (1977:1985) / 4:568 hoogte (2000:2005) / 4:573 wierden (2149:2155) / 4:574 Wierden (2170:2176) / 4:576 klei (2283:2286) / 4:577 natuur (2321:2326) / 4:578 bomen (2496:2500) / 4:580 Wierden (2598:2604) / 4:583 terpen (2710:2715) / 4:590 Klei (3092:3095) / 4:591 wierden (3114:3120) / 4:593 terpjes (3179:3185) / 4:595 schone lucht (3300:3311) / 4:596 groen (3349:3353) / 4:599 landschap (3400:3409) / 4:601 bos (3592:3594) / 4:602 natuur (3571:3576) / 4:605 Bergen (3650:3655) / 4:607 bos (3677:3679) / 4:609 Mooi landschap (4029:4042) / 4:611 veel natuur (4117:4127) / 4:615 Terp (4170:4173) / 4:616 aardbevingsgebied (4240:4256) / 4:617 Wierden (4261:4267) / 4:618 cultuurlandschap (4277:4292) / 4:619 wierden (4386:4392) / 4:620 klei (4415:4418) / 4:621 wierden (4473:4479) / 4:624 wierdenlandschap (4678:4693) / 4:625 groen (4724:4728) / 4:626 wierden (4898:4904) / 4:627 mooie landschappen (4928:4945) / 4:628 donkere nachten (5054:5068) / 4:629 Kleigrond (5114:5122) / 4:631 wierden (5223:5229) / 4:632 Wierden (5235:5241) / 4:635 natuur (5376:5381) / 4:636 bos (5413:5415) / 4:637 Wierdes (5421:5427) / 4:638 groen (5495:5499) / 4:640 terp (5527:5531) / 4:641 terpen (5590:5596) / 4:644 Wierden (5655:5661) / 4:647 natuur (5534:5539) / 4:650 vlak (5573:5577) / 4:655 groen (5920:5924) / 4:656 wierden (5935:5941) / 4:657 terpen (5956:5961) / 4:659 Wierden (6041:6047) / 4:661 groen (6134:6138) / 4:663 groen (6336:6340) / 4:668 landschap (6423:6432) / 4:669 wierden (6435:6441) / 4:670 weinig bos (6461:6470) / 4:673 Natuur (6542:6547) / 4:676 groen (6734:6738) / 4:677 groen (6766:6770) / 4:678 kleine bossen (6773:6785) / 4:679 Bos (6889:6891) / 4:680 gras (6917:6920) / 4:681 Wierden (7051:7057) / 4:682 wierden (7115:7121) / 4:683 Bos (7138:7140) / 4:684 dijk (4431:4434)

Misc

14 Quotations:

4:547 fabrieken (567:575) / 4:554 Grote gemeente (1461:1474) / 4:555 noord Groningen (1485:1499) / 4:569 gemeente (2008:2015) / 4:570 mts noordam (2020:2030) / 4:571 mts heeinga (2033:2043) / 4:572 glasvezel (2057:2065) / 4:579 trein (2508:2512) / 4:603 Verscheidenheid (3554:3568) / 4:639 Cultureel erfgoed (5476:5492) / 4:643 regen (5628:5633) / 4:658 noorden (6029:6035) / 4:665 gemeente (6374:6381) / 4:672 veel wind (6514:6522)

Openness

122 Quotations:

4:2 Ruimte (44:49) / 4:3 weidsheid (52:60) / 4:8 Wijds uitzicht (98:111) / 4:9 open (114:117) / 4:14 Ruimte (175:180) / 4:15 luchten (182:189) / 4:16 wijds (198:202) / 4:17 vlak (192:195) / 4:18 Vlak (206:209) / 4:19 open (234:237) / 4:20 uitgerekt (212:220) / 4:27 Weidse uitzichten (311:327) / 4:32 grote vlaktes (388:400) / 4:36 open heiden (448:458) / 4:38 ruimte (476:481) / 4:44 openheid (525:532) / 4:233 grote landschappen (1173:1190) / 4:249 vlak (1446:1449) / 4:251 Ruimtelijk (1526:1535) / 4:253 vlakke landschap (1600:1615) / 4:254 Eemshaven (1618:1626) / 4:261 horizon (1793:1799) / 4:262 open

(1802:1805) / 4:263 Ruim (1810:1813) / 4:264 vergezicht (1816:1825) / 4:273 vergezichten (2179:2190) / 4:277 vergezichten (2269:2280) / 4:279 Ruimte (2307:2312) / 4:286 ruimte (2409:2414) / 4:287 Ruimtelijk (2517:2526) / 4:288 Vergezicht (2419:2428) / 4:291 Ruimte (2470:2475) / 4:296 weide blik (2584:2593) / 4:304 Wijds (2729:2733) / 4:309 Vergezichten (2814:2825) / 4:310 open landschap (2828:2841) / 4:312 de prachtige luchten (2856:2875) / 4:313 Groot (2880:2884) / 4:314 Uitgestrekt (2909:2919) / 4:315 vergezichten (2922:2933) / 4:316 dunbevolkt (2936:2945) / 4:321 Weidsheid (3042:3050) / 4:322 vergezichten (3053:3064) / 4:324 ruimte (3097:3103) / 4:326 vlak (3134:3137) / 4:327 leeg (3152:3155) / 4:330 plat (3227:3230) / 4:334 Ruimte (3272:3277) / 4:335 mooie vergezichten (3279:3297) / 4:338 Vergezichten (3368:3379) / 4:339 ruimte (3381:3387) / 4:340 ruimte (3426:3431) / 4:341 Ruimtelijk (3460:3469) / 4:342 open landschap (3491:3504) / 4:343 Ruimte (3509:3514) / 4:344 vergezichten (3517:3528) / 4:346 ruimte (3579:3584) / 4:348 uitzicht (3605:3612) / 4:353 Wijds uitzicht (3684:3697) / 4:359 open (3826:3829) / 4:361 ruimte (3790:3795) / 4:362 Plat (3760:3763) / 4:366 vlak (3913:3916) / 4:378 uitgestrekt (4208:4218) / 4:380 weids (4270:4274) / 4:383 ruimte (4316:4321) / 4:398 weids (4524:4528) / 4:403 plat (4625:4628) / 4:406 ruimte (4655:4660) / 4:409 uitgestrektheid (4696:4710) / 4:410 Ruimte (4716:4721) / 4:416 vlak (4812:4815) / 4:422 Weide uitzichten (4910:4925) / 4:424 ruimte (4966:4971) / 4:425 Open landschap (4977:4990) / 4:428 Open landschap (5023:5036) / 4:429 mooie luchten (5039:5051) / 4:431 Groot (5083:5087) / 4:432 open (5090:5093) / 4:433 ruimte (5103:5108) / 4:435 open (5125:5128) / 4:437 ruimte (5151:5156) / 4:438 vergezichten (5168:5179) / 4:441 open landschap (5244:5257) / 4:444 vlak (5297:5300) / 4:446 open (5337:5340) / 4:447 plat (5331:5334) / 4:449 Ruim zicht (5358:5367) / 4:456 redelijk vlak (5450:5462) / 4:457 Ruimte (5468:5473) / 4:462 Plat (5623:5626) / 4:470 uitzicht (5834:5841) / 4:471 ruimte (5844:5849) / 4:474 weidsheid (5998:6006) / 4:478 Weidsheid (6080:6088) / 4:479 luchten (6091:6097) / 4:481 plat (6100:6103) / 4:482 Plat (6122:6125) / 4:483 ruimte (6158:6163) / 4:493 Ruimte (6320:6325) / 4:496 Weidsheid (6398:6406) / 4:497 mooie luchten (6409:6421) / 4:498 Open vlaktes (6447:6458) / 4:499 veel ruimte (6479:6489) / 4:500 Vlak (6495:6498) / 4:501 uitgestrekt (6501:6511) / 4:502 ruimte (6550:6555) / 4:506 ruimte (6616:6621) / 4:507 ruimte (6627:6632) / 4:509 weids (6641:6645) / 4:511 Ruimte (6659:6664) / 4:513 Open vlaktes (6694:6705) / 4:516 ruimte (6830:6835) / 4:517 ruimte (6841:6846) / 4:518 vergezicht (6849:6858) / 4:527 ruimte (7026:7031) / 4:530 open landschap (7068:7081) / 4:535 vlak (7184:7187) / 4:536 ruimte (7176:7181) / 4:537 mooie uitzichten (7203:7218) / 4:646 Ruimte (5550:5555) / 4:649 openheid (5564:5571)

Quietness

44 Quotations:

4:10 rust (127:130) / 4:23 rustig (258:263) / 4:55 niet dichtbevolkt (704:720) / 4:247 Stil (1432:1435) / 4:248 rustig (1438:1443) / 4:266 Rust (1901:1904) / 4:268 wandelen (1926:1933) / 4:280 rust (2315:2318) / 4:285 rust (2403:2406) / 4:292 rust (2478:2481) / 4:297 kerken (2621:2626) / 4:320 rust (3019:3022) / 4:323 rustig (3067:3072) / 4:337 rust (3343:3346) / 4:369 Rustig (3973:3978) / 4:373 Rustig (4081:4086) / 4:375 stil (4162:4165) / 4:382 Rust (4310:4313) / 4:384 stilte (4324:4329) / 4:402 rustig (4604:4609) / 4:404 rustig (4631:4636) / 4:405 Rust (4649:4652) / 4:411 rustig (4782:4787) / 4:412 vredig (4767:4772) / 4:413 dorps (4775:4779) / 4:414 dorps (4639:4643) / 4:415 dorps (4818:4822) / 4:430 de rust (5071:5077) / 4:436 Rust (5145:5148) / 4:450 rust (5370:5373) / 4:463 rustig (5636:5641) / 4:465 rustig (5681:5686) / 4:469 Rustig (5816:5821) / 4:472 rustig (5927:5932) / 4:480 rust/stilte (6106:6116) / 4:484 rust (6177:6180) / 4:494 stilte (6328:6333) / 4:505 rust (6611:6614) / 4:508 rust (6635:6638) / 4:515 rust (6812:6815) / 4:526 rust (7020:7023) / 4:585 stil (2901:2904) / 4:612 weinig mensen (4102:4114) / 4:648 rust (5558:5561)

Water

67 Quotations:

4:13 kwelders (143:150) / 4:51 Noordpolderzijl (649:663) / 4:58 Noordpolderzijl (756:770) / 4:63 zee (819:821) / 4:65 kwelder (830:836) / 4:69 Kwelders (841:848) / 4:102 Maren (1862:1866) / 4:124 maren (2566:2570) / 4:206 sloten (6788:6793) / 4:219 waddenzee (975:983) / 4:225 sloten (799:804) / 4:226 sloten (4501:4506) / 4:228 sloten (4804:4809) / 4:232 wadden (1165:1170) / 4:239 water (1260:1264) / 4:241 sluizen (1267:1273) / 4:252 Noordpolderzijl (1583:1597) / 4:260 maren (1786:1790) / 4:269 Water (1938:1942) / 4:270 kwelders (1954:1961) / 4:272 kwelders (2158:2165) / 4:276 zee (2253:2255) / 4:281 waddengebied (2329:2340) / 4:283 Wad (2390:2392) / 4:290 Eemshaven (2457:2465) / 4:293 kwelders (2548:2555) / 4:295 waddenzee (2573:2581) / 4:300 water (2690:2694) / 4:305 aan zee (2736:2742) / 4:329 waddenzee (3188:3196) / 4:347 zee (3586:3589) / 4:349 het wad (3615:3621) / 4:356 Water

(3736:3740) / 4:358 kwelder (3749:3755) / 4:360 Water (3800:3804) / 4:368 bruggetjes (3953:3962) / 4:372 zee (4074:4076) / 4:376 zee (4176:4178) / 4:377 wad (4181:4183) / 4:386 Waddenzee (4356:4364) / 4:389 Waddenzee (4395:4403) / 4:392 zee (4437:4439) / 4:395 zee (4482:4484) / 4:407 wad (4663:4665) / 4:408 kwelders (4668:4675) / 4:421 water (4891:4895) / 4:423 het Waddengebied (4948:4963) / 4:426 Waddenzee (4993:5001) / 4:434 wad (5131:5133) / 4:443 Waddenkust (5273:5282) / 4:445 zee/kwelders (5303:5314) / 4:452 riviertjes (5401:5410) / 4:454 Lauwersoog (5430:5439) / 4:458 Wadden (5502:5507) / 4:459 Wad (5542:5544) / 4:464 aan zee (5664:5670) / 4:468 kwelders (5803:5810) / 4:475 water (6009:6013) / 4:477 kwelders (6058:6065) / 4:487 Wad (6239:6241) / 4:488 kwelders (6244:6251) / 4:512 Eemshaven (6680:6688) / 4:519 wad/kwelder (6861:6871) / 4:521 bruggetjes (6894:6903) / 4:531 kwelders (7084:7091) / 4:533 Waddenzee (7124:7132) / 4:586 Kanalen (2960:2966)

Appendix 2: Provisional ''empty'' coding scheme

Main theme	**Subtheme**
1. Scale-enlargement, deinstitutionalization	Motivation for merging
	Small administrative units cooperating
2. Resistance and legitimacy	Justifiability of new administrations
	Resistance based on rational aspirations
	Resistance based on identity
3. Regional identity and sense of place	Territorial interpretation of the region
	Relational interpretation of the region
	Multiple identities (Paasi, 2013)
	Neotribalism (Maffesoli, 1996)
	Identity of the Region (Paasi, 2011)
	Regional consciousness (Paasi,2011)
	Use of place names (Williams & Stewart, 1998)
	Understand politics that are in place (Williams & Stewart, 1998)

4. Thick and thin identities	Thick identities (Terlouw, 2012)
	Downloading (Terlouw, 2012)
	Thin identities (Terlouw, 2012)
	Uploading (Terlouw, 2012)
5. Stickiness of regions	Institutionalised region do no directly turn in open integrated wholes (Zimmerbauer, 2017)
	Soft spaces (Eemsmond)
	Hard places (Fivelingo, Westerkwartier)
6. Place-promotion, marketing and branding	Similarities marketing narratives and Hogeland narrative
	Hogeland DMO

Appendix 3 Informed consent

rijksuniversiteit groningen / faculteit ruimtelijke wetenschappen

Informatiebrief voor participanten van het masteronderzoek 'De rol van regionale identiteit het gemeentelijke herindelingsproces van Het Hogeland'

Betreft
De randvoorwaarden voor het onderzoek over de rol van regionale identiteit in het gemeentelijke herindelingsproces in het Hogeland. Dit onderzoek is onderdeel van het master thesis traject van de master Culturele Geografie aan de Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. Mocht u vragen of opmerkingen hebben na het lezen van deze brief, dan hoor ik het graag.

Doelstelling onderzoek
De doelstelling van het masteronderzoek is het verkrijgen van inzicht in de rol van regionale identiteit voor en tijdens gemeentelijke herindelingen. Om dit te doen richt is dit onderzoek gericht op de gemeentelijke herindeling van Het Hogeland.

Wat houdt deelname in?
Als participant van het onderzoek gaat u deelnemen aan interview met een duur van ongeveer 60 minuten. Uw deelname is geheel vrijwillig en u kunt op elk gewenst moment besluiten om, zonder opgave van een reden, niet langer hieraan deel te nemen.

Wat gebeurt er met uw antwoorden?
Wanneer u hier toestemming geeft zal het interview opgenomen worden met een audio recorder. Het opnemen van interviews stelt de onderzoeker in staat om zijn of haar volledige aandacht te kunnen richten op het interview, zodat er na afloop geen belangrijke details vergeten worden van hetgeen u gezegd heeft. Hierbij is het van belang om te vermelden dat de door u verstrekte informatie op vertrouwelijke wijze behandeld zal worden en dat uw anonimiteit gewaarborgd blijft. De onderzoeksresultaten zullen enkel gebruikt worden binnen het kader van het Masterthesis traject aan de Rijkuniversiteit Groningen en zullen soms besproken worden met mijn scriptiebegeleider, dr. Arie Stoffelen. Indien van toepassing kunt u -ook achteraf- aangeven welke antwoorden niet verwerkt mogen worden in de masterscriptie.

Toestemmingsverklaring

Toestemmingsverklaring Indien u akkoord gaat met bovenstaande wil ik u vragen de onderstaande toestemmingsverklaring te ondertekenen. Het doel van de toestemmingsverklaring is dat u uw vrijwillige deelname bevestigt en dat u op de hoogte bent van de bovengenoemde randvoorwaarden van dit masteronderzoek.

rijksuniversiteit groningen / faculteit ruimtelijke wetenschappen

Toestemmingsverklaring voor het masteronderzoek 'De rol van regionale identiteit het gemeentelijke herindelingsproces van Het Hogeland'

Ik,....., bevestig hierbij dat ik de informatiebrief ten behoeve van het masteronderzoek 'De rol van regionale identiteit het gemeentelijke herindelingsproces van Het Hogeland' heb gelezen en hiermee akkoord ga.

Mijn naam mag genoemd worden in het onderzoeksverslag JA/NEE*

*In het geval van 'nee' zal er gebruikt worden gemaakt van een pseudoniem

Handtekening: Datum: …. / …. / ….

Naam van de onderzoeker: Oscar Kamminga

Ik verklaar hierbij dat ik de participanten volledig geïnformeerd heb over het masteronderzoek 'De rol van regionale identiteit het gemeentelijke herindelingsproces van Het Hogeland' en de gestelde voorwaarden in de bijbehorende informatiebrief zal respecteren.

Handtekening: Datum: .. / .. / ……

Appendix 4 Reflection logo Hogeland identity

Statistics

8. Weerspiegeling logo identiteit

N	Valid	164
	Missing	0
Mean		3,80
Median		4,00
Mode		4

8. Weerspiegeling logo identiteit

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	4	2,4	2,4	2,4
	2	5	3,0	3,0	5,5
	3	38	23,2	23,2	28,7
	4	90	54,9	54,9	83,5
	5	27	16,5	16,5	100,0
	Total	164	100,0	100,0	

Source: Stoffelen et al. 2020