

Psychologists or entrepreneurs?
- Tales from entrepreneurs

How local entrepreneurs perceive their contribution to the local sense of community

Nithika Anouk Samarasinghe S4251393

Bachelor Project

Supervisor: Tialda Haartsen

Word count: 6501

2024

<i>Summary</i>	2
<i>1. Introduction</i>	3
1.1 Background	3
1.2 Research problem	3
1.3 Structure of the thesis	4
<i>2. Theoretical framework</i>	4
2.1 Sense of community	4
2.2 Characteristics of local entrepreneurs	5
2.3 Local entrepreneurs and the sense of community	6
2.4 Conceptual model	7
<i>3. Methodology</i>	8
3.1 Sample and data collection	8
3.2 Research ethics	10
<i>4. Results</i>	10
4.1 Defining sense of community	10
4.2 Contribution of local entrepreneurs to the sense of community	12
4.3 Discussion	16
<i>5. Conclusions</i>	17
5.1 Strengths and weaknesses	17
5.2 Recommendations for further research	18
<i>References</i>	19
<i>Appendix: Semi structured interview guide</i>	21

Summary

In depopulating rural areas, one of the main concerns is dealing with the liveability of the village. It is often stated in research that depopulation trends in villages might result in the loss of facilities which can negatively affect the liveability of the village. A strong sense of community has a positive impact on the liveability of the village. This thesis examines how local entrepreneurs contribute to strengthening the sense of community in the village. Building on the concept of sense of community, the aim is to understand how local entrepreneurs view their contribution to the village community by proposing the following question: *“How do local entrepreneurs perceive their contribution to the local sense of community?”*. Seven semi structured interviews were conducted with local entrepreneurs in a village in the municipality of Het Hogeland. The findings show that the local entrepreneurs perceive their contribution to the sense of community through: the support offered to local community events, social trust and personalized customer service. The local entrepreneurs find it important to offer their support to the community as it is important for the livability of the village. The contribution to the sense of community seems to be similar for all interviewees, regardless of whether they feel part of the community themselves. Further research is proposed to be conducted on how the villagers perceive the contribution made by local entrepreneurs to the sense of community.

Key words: local entrepreneurs, sense of community, personalized customer service, social trust

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Ensuring the vitality of rural areas in the Netherlands as a result of depopulation trends is a topic in the Dutch political agenda (Bock & Haartsen, 2021). It is often seen in research that population decline in villages in the Netherlands might result in loss of facilities and this can negatively affect the liveability of the village (Christiaanse & Haartsen, 2017). This is because facility decline in villages is thought to have a negative effect on the inhabitant's satisfaction on livability in the village. Some local facilities are believed to foster a sense of community by facilitating the encounters between residents (Francis et al., 2012). This shows an association between local facilities as a space to foster the sense of community and highlights the importance of it for the vitality of the village.

Local businesses which are also facilities in a village, not only give the villagers access to services and products but also help foster economic activity in the village by providing jobs, support community events. This helps strengthen the sense of community in the village. Sense of community is important for the vitality of the village as it will have a positive effect on the inhabitant's satisfaction on livability in the village. This is relevant now as it is feared that the closure of facilities will negatively affect the livability of the village and contributes to the ongoing discussions on how to keep the local residents in the villages.

Most research is done on the influence of public spaces in fostering the sense of community and the inhabitant's perception of the sense of community in the village. Yet research does not look at the influence of local businesses and how local entrepreneurs strengthen the sense of community. Therefore, this thesis explores how local entrepreneurs contribute to the sense of community. This topic is important to be considered when addressing problems related to perceived liveability in rural communities.

1.2 Research problem

The aim of this research is to examine local entrepreneurs' experiences on how they contribute to strengthening the sense of community in the village. This is explored by conducting qualitative research on the following research question: "How do local entrepreneurs perceive their contribution to the local sense of community?". The following sub questions help understand the research question:

1. What is sense of community?
2. What characterizes rural entrepreneurs?
3. How do rural entrepreneurs relate to sense of community?

1.3 Structure of the thesis

The second section of the thesis presents the theoretical framework used to explain the characteristics and behaviors of local entrepreneurs which influence the sense of community. The third section includes the methodology used for data collection which is followed by its ethical consideration. The fourth section presents the results which are discussed through the lens of the theory and answer the main research question. Finally, the conclusion provides a summary of the main points, strengths and weaknesses of the research and recommendations for further research.

2. *Theoretical framework*

2.1 Sense of community

Sense of community is the feeling of togetherness and belonging that people have with each other as a result of shared spaces, values, social networks and trust. McMillan & Chavis (1986) define the sense of community as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (p. 9). Born and bred locals are assumed to be less mobile and more strongly attached to their village compared to newcomers who are more outwardly oriented (Gielsing et al., 2018). Moreover, a majority of the village inhabitants grow up attending the same public places of the village such as the school, sportclub, supermarket, the local bakery, bike store. Therefore, they share the same public spaces in the village with each other. According to rural sports participants, local sports clubs are “vital community hubs fostering social cohesion, local and regional identities and a shared focus and outlet” (Gielsing et al., 2018). These public spaces allow for informal social interaction with fellow residents. Public places that allow for informal social interaction such as facilities, have been shown to be beneficial for the sense of belonging to a community or social cohesion (Christiaanse & Haartsen, 2017). Sense of community reflects a focus on the social bonds within and between people and place, as well as the physical, symbolic, political and cultural implications of ‘community’ (Francis et al., 2012). In this research, a sense of community means the feeling of togetherness and belonging to a community as a result of shared values, spaces and social trust. Since the late 1950s, the preservation of local meeting places has been put forward as a necessary condition for social cohesion, which in turn should safeguard livability in rural areas facing depopulation (Gielsing et al., 2018).

Social trust arises as a result of shared values within a community which create expectations of honesty based on these values. Fukuyama (1995) states that such “trust arises when a community shares a set of moral values in such a way as to create regular expectations of regular and honest behavior” (p.153). Researchers in this field have recognised that informal networks have traditionally been stronger and more important in rural than urban areas (Bosworth, 2012).

Being a part of a village with a small number of residents and sharing the same spaces allows for regular interactions with each other. This allows for more extensive social ties in smaller villages (Gielsing et al., 2018).

These interactions are an opportunity to evaluate one another's shared values and give insight into each other's lives. Consequently, sharing the same values and seeing honest behavior creates social trust which results in supporting each other if help is needed.

2.2 Characteristics of local entrepreneurs

Local embeddedness of entrepreneurs is the extent to which they are integrated into the village in which they reside and operate their business. This embeddedness enables entrepreneurs to readily access and utilize opportunities and resources, such as human capital, knowledge, and information. Entrepreneurship is a function of the spatial, social, institutional contexts in which it occurs (Roundy, 2018). Research shows that entrepreneurs who are born and brought-up locally have the closest linkages with their immediate (geographically) context (in terms of labor recruitment, sourcing, sales destination, and origin of information flows), particularly in a rural setting and appear to be well embedded in the local socioeconomic milieu (Korsgaard et al., 2015). However, it may be possible for an entrepreneur to be overly embedded, and that social networks, perhaps particularly in rural areas, may stifle entrepreneurial activities e.g. by enforcing strict social norms and enforcing conformity to local values (Korsgaard et al., 2015). This could exclude entrepreneurs who are outsiders to the village from being involved in the community if they disagree to comply with the social norms of the village they function in. The concept of local embeddedness is used in this paper to better understand how local entrepreneurs use their contextual ties to function in the community.

Local entrepreneurs have an extensive social network due to their embeddedness in the community. Social networks are the relationships through which one receives opportunities to use financial and human capital – relationships in which ownership is not solely the property of an individual, but is jointly held among the members of a network (Korsgaard et al., 2015). Sociological theories suggest that economic activities such as entrepreneurship are embedded in social network contexts consisting of interpersonal relationships (ties) that can enhance an entrepreneur's ability to succeed by e.g. gaining access to idiosyncratic information, access to resources on favorable terms, and provide much needed legitimacy to the entrepreneur (Korsgaard et al., 2015). The social networks in the environment in which the rural entrepreneur chooses to operate has to be supportive to realize their dreams: values regarding entrepreneurship in the community, creating an enabling environment for the entrepreneur (Bryant, 1989). These networks are important for the entrepreneur to receive the support they need to function in the community. Therefore, the extensive social ties act as a gateway for the entrepreneur to connect with the community.

The sense of serving the community is integral to the perception of many rural businesses (Bosworth, 2012). Shopkeepers recognized that they had to be seen to be involved in the community whether selling raffle tickets, advertising local events or stocking local products (Bosworth & Atterton, 2012). Bosworth points out that community service, over and above individual “customer service” is important for the community to continue to support the business (Bosworth, 2012). Therefore, the sense of serving the community is a unique characteristic of local entrepreneurs due to their embeddedness in the community.

The primary function of the local entrepreneur is to provide a service, jobs and a physical store where customers can meet others. An entrepreneur is someone who senses the needs of the community and takes the initiative to transform the idea into a product or service (Bryant, 1989). Therefore, a primary function is to sense the needs of the community and offer a product or service.

Another function of the entrepreneur is to offer their store as a space for social interaction. Shops are important meeting and gathering places within the neighborhood, providing opportunities for proximity to others, passive social contact, and casual interactions (Francis et al., 2012). These places contribute to the social cohesion mentioned earlier. Facilities in a village have many functions other than providing a service. A study of the closure of a local diner showed that this facility did not only have a primary function (food consumption) and a social function (seeking social companionship), but also emotional meaning for many customers (Christiaanse & Haartsen, 2017). An empirical study of the closure of a local diner showed that this facility did not only have a primary function (food consumption) and a social function (seeking social companionship), but also emotional meaning for many customers (Christiaanse & Haartsen, 2017). The social function of the store promotes social cohesion and a sense of belonging to the community. A rural facility can also have an economic function for the region as it provides jobs (Farmer et al., 2012). This supports the internal economy of the village by reducing unemployment and keeping the money flowing within the village. Therefore, the physical store offered by the entrepreneur has a social, economic and symbolic function to it.

2.3 Local entrepreneurs and the sense of community

Bosworth uses the case study of a family newsagents businesses to show that rural entrepreneurs serve a finite customer base therefore, customer service is important for rural business and that it extends to the personal interaction of taking time out for friendly conversations with elderly residents and even helping them by posting their mail (Bosworth, 2012). The extra effort put in by the entrepreneur to make the customer feel attended to helps with customer loyalty and to build the reputation of the business.

Bosworth (2012) points out that customers did not mind that their newspaper was not delivered on days when the weather was bad because the previous extra effort of the entrepreneur strengthens customer loyalty.

The loyalty between the customer and the entrepreneur strengthens their relationship supporting each other and having a sense of belonging to the community. However, these efforts can have an altruistic attitude as the entrepreneur can expect something back from the customer. Bosworth (2012) mentions that this altruistic attitude extends to delivering advertisements and offering sponsorship for local community events; These actions are seldom taken with a clear purpose of selling more newspapers but they become an ingrained component of supporting the community (p.501).

Most local entrepreneurs are a part of the village association for entrepreneurs. Studies of entrepreneurs in rural and/or depleted areas have shown how engagement in social networks and communities gives entrepreneurs access to local resources to the benefit of the local areas (Bryant, 1989). Entrepreneurs work together to share their expertise and knowledge to work towards aiding in accomplishing their vision for the community. Local initiatives involve the use of local knowledge to achieve community goals (Bryant, 1989). Efforts of sponsoring local events, being a part of local initiatives such as entrepreneurs association, offering personalized customer service are acts of supporting and strengthening the sense of community in the village.

2.4 Conceptual model

The conceptual model is based on academic literature and it illustrates how characteristics of local entrepreneurs and their functions might contribute to strengthening the sense of community. The model shows the concepts related to the characteristics of local entrepreneurs and their function. Figure 1 shows that the entrepreneur has a primary and secondary function. The primary functions depict the role of an entrepreneur and the secondary functions depict other behaviors of the entrepreneur which can potentially influence the sense of community. The characteristics of the entrepreneur, their primary and secondary function are directed to the concept of a sense of community. This is to show that a combination of these three factors of the entrepreneur, influence the sense of community by strengthening it.

The expectations for the main research question: “How do local entrepreneurs perceive their contribution to the local sense of community?” are as follows: Firstly, the primary and secondary function of the entrepreneurs contribute to strengthening the sense of community without expecting anything in return from the community. Secondly, the local embeddedness of the entrepreneur helps this. Thirdly, there is one strong common factor which holds the community together.

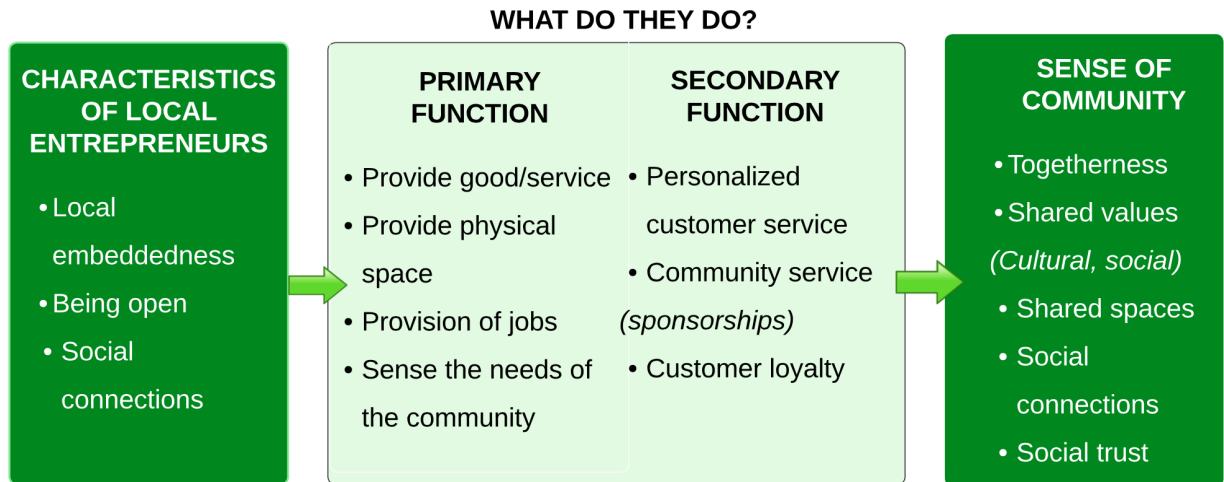


Figure 1: Conceptual model of the influence of the local entrepreneur on sense of community (author, 2024)

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample and data collection

Data collection was done in a village in the municipality of Het Hogeland. The village has a population size of <2000 inhabitants. The study is focused on the population of local entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs were chosen based on the criteria of if they were functioning and living in the village studied. Therefore entrepreneurs who were born/grew up in a different village yet have their business and live in the village were also included in the sample. These entrepreneurs who are outsiders to the village can have a different perspective on the sense of community than the entrepreneurs who grew up in the village. Therefore, the purposive sampling method was used to recruit entrepreneurs based on the characteristics of interest, avoiding sampling bias.

Entrepreneurs were recruited by visiting the business site in the village, explaining the purpose of the research and asking if they were interested in participating in an interview. The entrepreneur was on site in every location making it easier to make an appointment for an interview. A total of 7 in person interviews were conducted. The interviews took place at the entrepreneur’s business site and took between 30-45 minutes.

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the participants in the data collection. The 7 participants meet the requirements of the sample which is to function as an entrepreneur and live in the village that the data collection was carried out in. Three out of the seven participants were not born or had grown up in the village that they now live in. This gives an outsider's perspective on the sense of community in the village and their opinions on how they function or contribute to the community. The entrepreneurs offer different products and services which makes a difference in how they function and make contact with the community.

The owner of the cafe had 2 different businesses. The data collection was based on one of the businesses which was the cafe. This cafe operated in the village. The owner of the craft store worked part time in the agri sector while playing the role of entrepreneur in their craft business.

Interviews	Interview date	Gender	Business	Origin of entrepreneur	Hours worked
1	18.04.24	Female	Retailer 2	Outsider	Full time
2	18.04.24	Female	Florist	Insider	Full time
3	18.04.24	Male	Pet shop	Outsider	Full time
4	18.04.24	Male	Retailer 1	Insider	Full time
5	24.04.24	Female	Bike store	Outsider	Full time
6	24.04.24	Female	Craft store	Outsider	Part time
7	13.05.24	Male	Cafe	Insider	Part time

Table 1: Characteristics of the participants (author, 2024)

According to Kendall (2014), the purpose of a qualitative interview is the exploration of meaning. Therefore, a semi structured interview guide (Appendix 1) was created as the primary data collection instrument. The semi structured interview guide allows the interviewee to reflect on their own experiences in regard to the sense of community in the village. The nature of the interview guide allows the conversation between the entrepreneur and the researcher to unfold naturally and the questions help guide back to the topic of research if the conversation side tracks. The in person, in-depth interviews helps to clarify misconceptions, helps establish rapport and the non verbal cues of the participants give insights into their attitudes and emotions on the topic which adds to the quality of the data.

Data was analyzed firstly by transcribing the interviews from the voice recordings. Secondly, quotes from the interviewees which related to the concepts on the conceptual model and theoretical framework were manually highlighted. New findings were discovered from the interviews. These findings were used to make conclusions which are discussed in the results section.

3.2 Research ethics

The author lives in the city of Groningen and spends a few days a week in Baflo. Baflo is a village in the municipality of Het Hogeland with <2000 inhabitants and is located close by to the village studied.

The author has experienced living in a small village community similar to the village studied. This was an advantage when recruiting respondents for the data collection as the author converses in the Dutch language and knows how to approach people in a small village community.

The research was conducted in line with the General Data Protection Regulation put forth by the European Union. The participants were asked to sign a consent form in which they agreed to their responses being used in the research, it being anonymous and the interview being voice recorded with the intention of later transcribing the interviews for data analysis. At the start of the interview, the participants were informed about their right to withdraw themselves from the interview at any moment. Further, the participants were asked for their verbal consent to voice record the interview.

The name of the village studied is not mentioned due to the village being small and not offering more than one of the same business. Therefore, the participants are referred to by the service offered by their business i.e. florist, retailer. This maintains anonymity while still providing relevant information about the participants' role in the village. The data collected will not be shared with a third party. The recordings of the interviews have been deleted from all devices.

4. *Results*

The primary objective of data collection was to understand how local entrepreneurs think they influence the sense of community in the village by strengthening it, based on how they define the sense of community in and their function as an entrepreneur.

4.1 Defining sense of community

To answer the main research question “How do local entrepreneurs perceive their contribution to the local sense of community?” It was important to understand how the local entrepreneurs described the sense of community in the village they live and work in. In general, all respondents perceive a sense of community as entailing supporting one another. Based on their responses, there seem to be three components of a sense of community which are related to their business, religion and social trust.

Sense of community to entrepreneurs entails supporting and helping out each other with a task or supporting local initiatives and business to survive. It is also about noticing when someone needs help and helping out without the person having to ask for help. Entrepreneurs have the ability to do this through their social networks, expert knowledge and local embeddedness in the village.

"You just support each other with everything. So when you go to buy clothes, I often buy online, but I first take a look at what Retailer 1 has to offer. If I have enough money I buy bread at the local bakery. So you try to support each other like that." Craft store

"Having an eye for each other, an ear for each other, supporting each other, making sure that everyone is okay, helping each other with odd jobs, purchasing their products, by doing all kinds of things together. To help each other and have fun with each other every now and then.... and if someone needs help, there is no need to talk about it but it's being done for them." Retailer 1

This shows that the people in the village are ready to help each other if anyone needs help and that they know where to find them. It is also about the entrepreneur showing the customer that they are available to help just as how the customers support the entrepreneur with their business by choosing to be a regular customer.

"Knowing where to find each other and knowing that you can rely on each other. You also know that your customers come here and support your business but you can also be there for them the other way around." Florist

The village studied has less than 2000 inhabitants. Therefore it's a small community where a majority of the people know each other then you want to help each other.

"In a very small community, you think of each other and then help each other." Pet store

In a community there are factors which bring the community together and thereby, help form bonds with each other. A lot of people are Christian in the village studied. Religion plays a role in bringing the community together. People who share the same belief meet each other every Sunday at church and when they are involved together in activities in the village. This is one factor which brings the community together. However, this can also shut certain people out of the community if they don't share the same values. The owner of the pet store is an outsider to the village yet, he lives in the village and does not share the religious beliefs.

"In a religious community it is a bit more difficult because some people are also excluded." Pet store

“I do not share the same norms and values as the community. I try to adapt to that community as much as possible. To simply have mutual respect for each other. I try to be myself and give my opinion about things.” Craft store

There are different groups within the community. In this situation are those who are christians and those who do not have any religious beliefs. The pet store, craft store and bike store gives an outsider perspective on the sense of community in the village and how the entrepreneurs react to it. Despite the differences, mutual respect allows the community to come together.

“If you are going to throw a big party, there are a lot of people who participate in it. For example the sense of community is stronger during the big village market.” Pet store

Social trust begins to develop when people see regular and honest behavior of each other.

“I also play at a volleyball club. Many residents from the church are also members there. So they see each other a lot on Sundays, but also during the week at school... So they grow up together which creates a kind of bond”. Retailer 1

Social trust gives people the sense that they can rely on each other if something happens. If someone is sick and cannot go to the store to get food, they know that there will be someone to help them.

*“So whether it's just that someone needs a babysitter, getting groceries when someone is sick or they have a broken leg and the windows need to be cleaned... it will be done by the neighbors.”
Craft store*

4.2 Contribution of local entrepreneurs to the sense of community

There are several ways in which local entrepreneurs contribute to the sense of community in the village. Some entrepreneurs contribute on their own, some are shared efforts with other entrepreneurs and some entrepreneurs take a regional perspective where they go beyond supporting the village and look at the development of the region.

Entrepreneurs contribute by themselves to the sense of community by offering personal customer service. This is done by word of mouth. They make the effort to talk to their customers who are majority from the village itself. This way the entrepreneur is able to connect with the community and get to know how the customers and the villagers are doing.

“Customers who come to the store have experienced something in the family, with health or whatever. The customers share their story and we discuss it. Then there is an interest the next time they come to ask about how so and so doing now...? Then they say nice that you ask and we laugh. We are not only a store, we are almost psychologists.” Retailer 1

When the entrepreneurs serve a finite customer base, they learn the story behind the people fast. The next time a customer walks in, they don't have to start telling their story from the beginning. If the customer needs help with something personal they can rely on the entrepreneur without further explanation .

“You know the story behind the people so I think that it is very important that people also know that they do not have to lay out their whole story here on the table because we already know it”.
Florist

The entrepreneurs offer a positive experience to the customers. This way the customers know that they are being taken care of and form a better relationship with the entrepreneur. Offering the customer help in deciding a present together and making the experience personal.

“...When they come in here, we just have a nice chat.” Craft store

“They come in and say that they're actually looking for a present. So I say come on, let's go and look for a present. Like this, I'm very easy to get in touch with.” Retailer 2

The entrepreneurs recognize that when they sponsor an event, the people are grateful for the sponsorship and that they come back to the entrepreneur to support their business.

“We support many music associations in neighboring villages and they often come here to choose clothes...not everyone does that, but you increasingly notice that people are aware of our support to them and they offer their support back.” Retailer 1

Entrepreneurs contribute to the community by offering a physical space where the people can meet each other forming a social meaning. The entrepreneur mentioned that the customers are proud to have such a place in their village which brings together so many people.

“Well, we are not just a village pub but we certainly have a function in the village. We have consciously chosen to have longer opening hours during the weekend. People can come here and have a drink at the bar if they don't want to have a bite to eat. We can see here that the people are mixing with each other.” Cafe

Entrepreneurs who have functioned in the village for a long time contribute to the customer loyalty. Providing a good service for a long time, being active in the community and helping the community shows loyalty to the people.

“When we're going to lay a new floor in a house, we show what it's going to look like. If you choose to do it with a company like us which has been around for so long and is known in the region, you dare to put some more trust in that company to do a good job”. Retailer 1

Entrepreneurs do not expect anything back from the support they offer to the community. However, it is a form of advertising that they do if they offer a bouquet of flowers as a prize and there is a sticker with the name of the business on it. The entrepreneurs recognize the importance of sponsoring these events for the liveability of the village.

“We do sponsorships, which of course means advertising your company but we don't expect anything in return. It's more about building the community. The community actually needs sponsorships to maintain or continue to grow. So, as an entrepreneur you just have to give the tennis club a gift for bingo every now and then. Otherwise there is no tennis club anymore. Those kinds of things are the duties of the entrepreneurs.” Pet shop

Entrepreneurs not only support community events but also organize events which bring people together. Before the COVID 19 pandemic, the craft store organized a knitting cafe once a week where a group of people came together to knit and share their thoughts.

The entrepreneurs support the other entrepreneurs from the community by purchasing from them or offering a service even though it might cost extra effort, time or money. This support helps sustain local businesses which are important for the community.

“If you look at us, for example, we make a conscious choice to source our bread from the local bakery. It may be a bit more expensive than if you bought it wholesale. This creates a nice story and you also try to contribute in a small way to ensure that the local bakery sustains in the village.” Cafe

The local businesses are able to provide employment to people in the village. This can help the employers feel pride in the local business they work at. In the interviews conducted, the entrepreneurs mentioned that their employees come from the village itself and a few come from villages close by.

*“We have four employees in the clothing section who actually live in the neighborhood.”
Retailer 1*

Local entrepreneurs work together with other entrepreneurs to support and organize local events which bring the community together. They offer their support by sponsoring the events or offering a prize for a raffle at the music bingo. The entrepreneurs association decides together how they are going to support the event through offering volunteers, providing prizes, costumes and sponsorships.

“We entrepreneurs get together once in a while. There are many things that a sports club encounters and say that they want to organize something and need volunteers. Then the others might say that they also need volunteers but at a different time. Then they ask if they can borrow the same volunteers. We will do so if it's possible. So in this way you coordinate things like that with each other and it works very well.” Retailer 1

There is an annual hut building event by the youth. This event brings together the youth in the village and adults join to help them with the construction of the huts. Local entrepreneurs support this event by sponsoring it or offering the supplies needed for it. Here, the entrepreneurs work together with the community to make this event happen.

“The young people build huts here once a year. Then the community comes together to help them out. So everyone who feels connected to this activity comes together and bond with each other...So then we have a lot of collaboration with each other.” Pet store

Here, the entrepreneurs support an event which brings the community together. The entrepreneurs see the value in supporting these events and initiatives of the community.

“It's just really fun and enjoyable, so why wouldn't you support it?.” Craft store

The entrepreneurs association works together with other associations and the municipality i.e. sports associations to work towards achieving the community goals. Here, the entrepreneurs have an influence in improving certain aspects of the village or bring attention to problems.

“We have raised money for this community and in this case for our village city center. We contributed to this ourselves so we are involved in it now. We have now submitted a fund application for €1,5 million and we have been awarded it, so with that money we can make this center more attractive again for the villagers”.

The entrepreneurs association is now composed of regional entrepreneurs from the region in which the village is located. The entrepreneurs think beyond the village they function in to develop the entire region with the influence of knowledge and networks the entrepreneurs share with each other. The contributions they make to strengthen the sense of community in the villages they function in has a positive effect on the liveability of the region.

“You actually have to think bigger than just your own village. You have to work together to help the region improve and you don't have to do it one village at a time.” Retailer 1

The local entrepreneur's contribution to the sense of community differs per level of contribution: contribution on their own, shared efforts with other entrepreneurs and some entrepreneurs look at the contribution offered to the sense of community in the village having a positive effect on the development of the entire region.

4.3 Discussion

The role of the entrepreneur in the village extends beyond only providing a product or service. The entrepreneurs support local events which bring the community together by sponsoring events or helping with providing the events with necessities such as costumes or tools. The entrepreneurs interviewed mentioned that the support offered is for the community and they do not expect anything in return; however, they believe that if they help the community, the support will be returned. This finding is supported by Bosworth (2012) who mentions that there is an altruistic attitude when offering sponsorship for local community events and that there is a clear purpose of but they become an ingrained component of supporting the community (p.501).

Bosworth (2012) mentions that customer service extends to the personal interaction of taking time out for friendly conversations with elderly residents and even helping them by posting their mail. This is because entrepreneurs in the village have a finite customer base therefore, they offer personalized customer service. This is done by talking to the customers and showing interest in them. Participants described themselves as playing the role of a psychologist to the customers as the customers share their problems. This is due to the social trust the customer has with the entrepreneur and knowing that they can share such situations. This shows the customer that they can rely on the entrepreneur if they need help with anything and that there is no need to start explaining their situation from the beginning as the entrepreneur already knows it. The entrepreneur shows that they offer social trust, support and reliability which are components of a sense of community.

Entrepreneurs use their extended social networks which are developed as a result of their embeddedness in the village to work on projects which benefit the village and the community. Bryant (1989) mentions that Entrepreneurial activity can be categorized as team building or getting the community involved in the long term planning process as well as implementation. The participants mentioned that they work together with the entrepreneurs association in the region to make the village center more attractive. This benefits the village community and makes the village attractive for migrants. This action of the entrepreneur increases the liveability of the village.

Public places that allow for informal social interaction, such as facilities, have been shown to be beneficial for the sense of belonging to a community or social cohesion (Christiaanse & Haartsen, 2017). The physical space offered by the entrepreneur contributes to the sense of community as it is a place that promotes social interaction. Retailer 2 mentioned that they always have coffee and tea prepared for whoever walks into the store. If the customer meets someone they know at the store, they can enjoy a cup of coffee together. This shows that the entrepreneur sees the importance of this social interaction from taking place.

5. *Conclusions*

This thesis answers the research question “How do local entrepreneurs perceive their contribution to the local sense of community?” and the findings suggest that the local entrepreneur’s contribution to the sense of community differs per level of contribution: contribution on their own, shared efforts with other entrepreneurs and some entrepreneurs look at the contribution offered to the sense of community in the village having a positive effect on the development of the entire region. The contribution made by the entrepreneurs by themselves is through personalized customer service, offering help and support to local events and initiatives, offering a physical store which promotes social interaction among villagers. Christiaanse & Haartsen (2017) mention in their research, that the store of the entrepreneur has a social function to it which promotes social interaction among villagers and thereby foster a sense of community. The entrepreneurs contribute to the sense of community by working together with other entrepreneurs and help organize local events and offer support to the village community. They do this by making use of their social networks, embeddedness and expert knowledge. The contribution and support to the community helps bring the community together and strengthens it. These efforts have a positive effect on the inhabitant’s satisfaction on livability in the village making the village resilient to depopulation trends.

5.1 Strengths and weaknesses

The strength of this study is that the semi structured interviews unveiled relevant information for the study and the composition of the participants were able to provide the perspective of the entrepreneur as an outsider to the village and perspective as an insider and how they approach the community and their contribution to the community. This thesis is relevant as it looks at the perspective of the entrepreneur on strengthening the sense of community while most studies are on how the villagers perceive the sense of community.

However, a weakness is the small sample size. Only 7 entrepreneurs were interviewed and having more respondents in the data collection would give more insight on the topic researched. It was challenging to recruit respondents due to the village studied being small.

5.2 Recommendations for further research

This thesis looks at how local entrepreneurs perceive their contribution to strengthen the sense of community in the village. Further research can be conducted on how the villagers perceive the contribution made by local entrepreneurs to the sense of community. It can also be interesting to conduct this same research in a few more small villages in the region to explore if there is a similar pattern in how the entrepreneurs perceive their contribution to the sense of community.

References

- Bock, B., & Haartsen, T. (2021). Who is afraid of population decline? The Struggle of Keeping Rural Depopulation on the Dutch Agenda. *AGER: Journal of Depopulation and Rural Development Studies*, 33, 35–56. <https://doi.org/10.4422/ager.2021.22>
- Bosworth, G. (2012). Characterising rural businesses – Tales from the paperman. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 28(4), 499–506. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2012.07.002>
- Bosworth, G., & Atterton, J. (2012). Entrepreneurial In-migration and Neoendogenous Rural Development. *Rural Sociology*, 77(2), 254–279. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1549-0831.2012.00079.x>
- Bryant, C. R. (1989). Entrepreneurs in the rural environment. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 5(4), 337–348. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0743-0167\(89\)90060-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/0743-0167(89)90060-0)
- Christiaanse, S., & Haartsen, T. (2017). The influence of symbolic and emotional meanings of rural facilities on reactions to closure: The case of the village supermarket. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 54, 326–336. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2017.07.005>
- Farmer, J., Prior, M., & Taylor, J. (2012). A theory of how rural health services contribute to community sustainability. *Social Science & Medicine*, 75(10), 1903–1911. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2012.06.035>
- Francis, J., Giles-Corti, B., Wood, L., & Knuiiman, M. (2012). Creating sense of community: The role of public space. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 32(4), 401–409. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2012.07.002>
- Fukuyama, F. (1995). *Trust : the social virtues and the creation of prosperity*. Free Press Paperbacks.

- Gieling, J., Haartsen, T., & Vermeij, L. (2018). Village Facilities and Social Place Attachment in the Rural Netherlands. *Rural Sociology*, *84*(1), 66–92. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ruso.12213>
- Kendall, L. (2014). *Handbook of Research on New Literacies* (J. Coiro, M. Knobel, C. Lankshear, & D. J. Leu, Eds.; 1st ed.). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410618894>
- Korsgaard, S., Ferguson, R., & Gaddefors, J. (2015). The best of both worlds: how rural entrepreneurs use placial embeddedness and strategic networks to create opportunities. *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development*, *27*(9-10), 574–598.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08985626.2015.1085100>
- McMillan, D., & Chavis, D. (1986). Sense of community: A definition and theory. *Journal of Community Psychology*, *14*(1), 6–23. <https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6629>
- Roundy, P. T. (2018). “It takes a village” to support entrepreneurship: intersecting economic and community dynamics in small town entrepreneurial ecosystems. *International Entrepreneurship and Management Journal*, *15*(4), 1443–1475.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11365-018-0537-0>

Appendices

Appendix 1: Semi structured interview guide

Ik ben Anouk Samarasinghe en ik studeer sociale geografie en planologie aan de Rijksuniversiteit in Groningen. Ik ben momenteel bezig met mijn scriptie. Ik onderzoek naar de manieren waarop lokale ondernemers hun bijdrage aan het lokale gemeenschapsgevoel ervaren? Een sterk gemeenschapsgevoel is belangrijk voor de vitaliteit in het dorp. Lokale ondernemers kunnen hierin een belangrijke rol spelen. Ik ben benieuwd hoe lokale ondernemers denken bij te dragen aan het gemeenschapsgevoel in het dorp en hoe zij dat doen. Het interview zal ongeveer 30-45 minuten duren en het zal anoniem zijn. De gegevens worden niet gedeeld met een derde partij. Als u het goed vindt, zal ik dit interview opnemen. Na beoordeling van de scriptie worden de opnames verwijderd. U kunt er op elk moment voor kiezen om het interview te stoppen. Bent u het ermee eens dat het interview wordt opgenomen? Zo ja, heeft u nog vragen voordat we gaan beginnen?

Openingsvragen

Zou u/je iets meer over uzelf/jezelf kunnen vertellen?

Waar kom je vandaan?

- Hoe lang woon je hier al?
- Kunt u/je wat over uw/jouw bedrijf vertellen?
 - Hoe ben je begonnen?
 - Wanneer ben je begonnen?
 - Werken hier vooral mensen uit het dorp?

Hoofdvragen

1. Wat betekent “gemeenschapsgevoel” voor jou?
 - a. Wat maakt een dorpsgemeenschap een gemeenschap? Wat draagt daaraan bij?
 - b. Welke factoren beïnvloeden dit volgens jou?
2. Hoe definieert je gemeenschapsgevoel in je dorp?
 - a. Is er een gedeeld gemeenschapsgevoel of zijn er verschillen binnen het dorp?
 - b. Hoe denk je dat iemand van ergens anders het ziet?
3. Deel je dezelfde waarden als de gemeenschap? Geef een voorbeeld
 - a. Heeft dit invloed op jouw werk als lokale ondernemer?
4. Hoe maak je contact met je klanten?
 - a. Heeft je persoonlijke achtergrond invloed op de manier waarop je contact maakt met klanten? Zo ja, geef een voorbeeld
5. Hoe raak je betrokken door de gemeenschap?
 - a. Verwacht je er iets van terug? Geef een voorbeeld

Afsluitende vragen

Bedankt voor je deelname aan dit interview. Heb je nog vragen/ wil je nog iets toevoegen?