

**Place attachment of rural villages in the north of the Netherlands:
a case study in the municipality of Noordenveld**

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Summary

In the Netherlands, a population decrease is occurring in rural areas. This is particularly the case in the northern provinces of the country. Still, there are a lot of individuals associated with rural environments who choose to stay. The study aims to understand why certain inhabitants maintain a strong connection to their rural areas despite demographic changes. The concept of place attachment, which encompasses social interactions, relationships, and identity, serves as the central focus of the research. By raising the question '*How do social interactions, relationships, and identity in rural areas in the northern Netherlands shape the place attachment of older adults?*' the objective of the research is to find out what factors influence place attachment to understand the motives of individuals that stay in the rural areas. The study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews with individuals aged 60 or above who currently reside in the Noorderveld municipality. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data, following a partially deductive approach informed by the existing literature. The results of the interviews show that close relationships and different forms of interaction are important for attachment to the place. The role of identity is not recognized by the participants. Further research could focus on a larger and more diverse sample size.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been increasing discussion of a perceived gap between the rural and urban regions in the Netherlands in terms of the type of inhabitants and population numbers. Dutch rural areas are experiencing population decline whereas urban areas are experiencing population growth (CBS, 2022). The urban areas tend to attract a predominantly youthful population due to the available job and education opportunities while an ageing population is affecting the rural areas (Haartsen & Venhorst, 2010).

According to Haartsen et al. (2003), the north of the Netherlands is the only Dutch region that can be classified as rural. The municipality of Noorderveld, one of these rural areas, has experienced a population decline over the past years. The population is similarly expected to decline by another 5.1% in the range between 2021 and 2035 (CBS, 2022). The same projection by CBS indicates that the urban areas will increase in population. Nevertheless, it is certainly not the case that rural areas are completely depopulating. In rural areas, there are significant groups of people who will stay due to the social connection to a rural area (Haartsen & Stockdale, 2018). The research aims to investigate why these inhabitants have such a strong connection to a particular area. The general concept associated with this connection is *place attachment*.

Place attachment is a multifaceted concept. It is a concept expressing a certain commitment that may have different feelings or meanings for each individual (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). In the research of Scannell & Gifford (2010), it is described that place attachment is a multidimensional concept. One of the claims in the paper by Scannell & Gifford (2010) is that much of the research on place attachment is related to its social aspect where people are connected to places that facilitate social relationships and group identity. Another part of the article by Scannell & Gifford (2010) explains that place attachment is inherently social and therefore often compared and combined with the concept of 'sense of community'. A distinguishment can be made between 'community of interest' and 'community of place', where the connection emerges from geographical locations. These geographical locations do not only consist of spaces like buildings, amenities and nature but also of places where social ties are formed or social interactions occur. The research in this thesis will consist of a set of significant components associated with place attachment according to Scannell & Gifford (2010). The components include social interactions, relationships, and the village's identity. The research will focus on these components and how these components contribute to the formation of residents' perceptions of place attachment to rural places. As rural areas are expected to experience population decline, examining the reasoning of inhabitants who decide to remain in rural areas becomes interesting. The research question in the research is: *How do social interactions, relationships, and identity in rural areas in the northern Netherlands shape the place attachment of older adults?*

Sub-questions that assist in examining the central question are:

- *What types of social interactions and relationships shape the place attachment for older adults in rural areas in the municipality of Noordenveld?*
- *What is the perceived role of community networks in shaping place attachment for older adults in rural areas in the municipality of Noordenveld?*
- *What is the perceived role of the identity of an area in shaping place attachment for older adults in rural areas in the municipality of Noordenveld?*

According to CBS (2022), the municipality of Noordenveld is expected to experience a population decline. The municipality of Noordenveld has a population of 31000. One of the major age groups is those aged 65+ with approximately 9000 residents (Alle Cijfers, 2023). A specific age group of older adults has been chosen, as this age group potentially has lived in the area for a longer period. The municipality of Noordenveld was partly selected as the research area due to the researcher's personal contacts.

The research seeks to understand how residents perceive and experience attachment to a particular rural place. Based on interviews with residents in the municipality of Noordenveld, it becomes apparent how social interactions, relationships and identity contribute to the perception of place attachment of inhabitants. The first part of the thesis reviews the existing literature that relates to place attachment and its different components. Based on the literature a conceptual model has been created. Following this, a description is given of how the data was collected and how the data will be analysed. This section includes a description of how the privacy of participants is ensured. The findings are outlined in the results section. In the results section, the code tree derived from the literature reviewed and the conducted interviews with participants are presented. Based on the codes, the results are described. From which a conclusion can be written. The conclusion section includes a reflection on the results and research process and suggestions for further research.

Theoretical Framework

In the research, place attachment in rural areas will be addressed. Manzo and Divine-Wright (2020, p. 4) define place attachment as ‘powerful emotional bonds that form between people and their physical surroundings. They inform our sense of identity, create meaning in our lives, facilitate community, and influence action’. Scannell and Gifford (2010) define place attachment into three dimensions: *Person, Place and Process*. The different dimensions indicate the versatility of the concept of place attachment. The research will focus on the social dynamics in which social interaction and relationships may potentially impact place attachment. A place can be disaggregated into the physical and social environment, where the social environment includes the social arena where interactions occur. The focus of the study derives from the article of Scannell and Gifford (2010). The article reveals that the major factor of place attachment is the dimension of place itself. Much of the literature on place attachment focuses on the social aspect. Like this research, the article examines various aspects within the social domain of place attachment. This research will specifically examine the social interactions and relationships described in the social domain of place according to Scannell and Gifford (2010). Place attachment can be connected to identity and reinforce interaction and the sense of community (Manzo & Devine-Wright, 2020). The research investigates if this connection also works the other way around: Do identity, social interactions and social relationships reinforce place attachment?

Social interactions are defined as “a situation where the behaviours of one actor are consciously reorganized by, and influence the behaviours of, another actor, and vice versa” (Turner, 1989, p. 13-14). The study is about interactions between residents of rural villages. In this instance, the study involves conversations between residents, greetings, and brief conversations. A definition by the American Psychological Association is: “any process that involves reciprocal stimulation or response between two or more individuals (...). Social interaction includes the development of cooperation and competition, the influence of status and social roles, and the dynamics of group behaviour, leadership, and conformity.” (*APA Dictionary of Psychology*, n.d.). Place

attachment is primarily shaped by the social interactions within a village, which defines the essence of the emotional connection between individuals and their surroundings (Ilovan & Markuszewska, 2022).

Relationships related to place attachment refer to social bonds and shared experiences (Verbrugge & Van Den Born, 2018). Studies on place attachment indicate how attachment to a place can be based on other people, for example, friends, family and communities (Altman & Low, 1992). According to Altman & Low (1992), social relations may be equally or even more significant in the attachment process than solely the place. Riley (1992) states that attachment not just consists of the physical entities but may be especially associated with experiences and meanings involved in relationships. A definition by the American Psychological Association is: “a continuing and often committed association between two or more people, as in a family, friendship, marriage, partnership, or other interpersonal link in which the participants have some degree of influence on each other’s thoughts, feelings, and actions” (*APA Dictionary of Psychology*, n.d.). The study is about relationships between residents of rural villages. These are relationships between people who live close to one another and relationships that affect an individual's sense of place. It may be argued that social interactions and relationships can be considered to coexist. The type of interaction can be determined by the form of relationship people have.

Concerning identity, the concept refers to the identity of a given area. The identity of a region is described as the combination of characteristics a person ascribes to that region (Rijnks & Strijker, 2013). The identity of a particular environment results in individuals identifying by this identity and subsequently feeling connected to the environment in some way. Social identity arises from the pursuit of both similarity within one's social group and distinctiveness from out-groups. Place plays a role in this by providing information about physical and social attributes, which contribute to a sense of distinctiveness or similarity. Similarity to others in a neighbourhood, for instance, fosters a feeling of belonging through comparisons. On the other hand, differentiation in place identity relies on unique features like climate or landscape, which carry specific connotations. Overall, people form a connection to a place that reflects their identity, integrating it cognitively and personally into their self-definition (Brewer, 1991).

The specific context of place attachment in the research are rural areas. The social characteristics of rural areas are described as freedom, kind-heartedness, friendliness and small scale associated with the rural idyll (Bijker et al., 2012). Freedom is perceived as an individualistic trait but can equally be understood as the freedom to choose with whom to interact and in which groups an individual desires to be involved. Studies show that the smaller number of rural inhabitants facilitates more interaction and a strong sense of belonging (Krout, 1988). However, other studies have examined that the relationship between the size of the population and social interaction is not that simple and that the social construction and the meaning of rural also influence social interaction (Cloke & Milbourne, 1992). Despite the importance of social interactions and relationships in shaping place attachment among older adults in rural areas, there is a research gap in understanding the specific factors that contribute to this relationship.

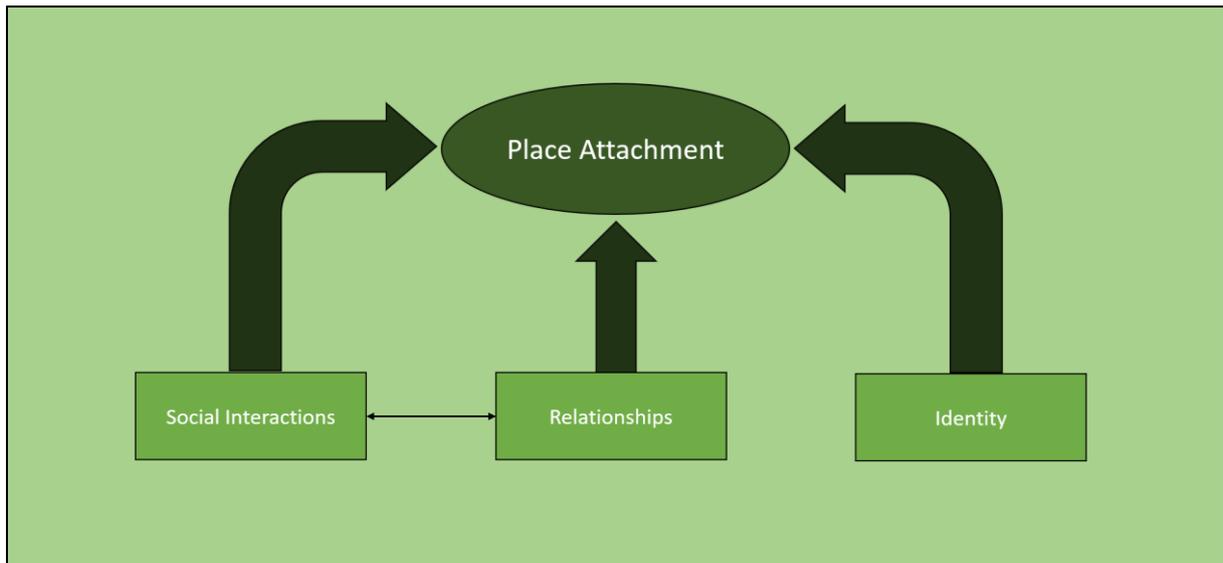


Figure 1. Conceptual Model created by the author.

The conceptual model (figure 1) presents the concepts related to place attachment within the context of the research. Place attachment is centrally positioned in the conceptual model because of its importance within the research. The components of place attachment, social interactions, relationships and identity, are positioned below and on either side of place attachment. The concepts lead to the possibility of place attachment interlinked with the rural area. The concepts of social interactions and relationships are connected as the literature reveals that the type of interaction can be influenced by the kind of relationship between inhabitants.

Methodology

Study design

A qualitative approach was chosen as the research method for this study as the research questions concern the individual experiences of local residents. Another reason for qualitative research is the comprehensiveness of the concept of place attachment. Because there are multiple interpretations of this concept, it is interesting to explore how people's individual perceptions influence experiences of place attachment. A qualitative approach provides a greater opportunity to delve deeper into the individual's experiences, beliefs, and emotions regarding place attachment.

Participant recruitment

The interviewees were recruited in different ways. First, the personal contacts of the author were utilised. In this process, no individuals whom the author knows personally were interviewed but family members or friends of personal contacts of the author residing in the municipality of Noordenveld. Participants were also engaged through contact with the Noordenveld municipality. For this study, the author selected individuals who presently reside in the Noordenveld municipality as the inclusion criterion. The author opted to interview individuals who are aged 60 or above because their age might be associated with greater familiarity with the development of place attachment.

Data collection

The research used a semi-structured interview approach guided by an interview guide described in appendix A. Opening questions were asked to make the interviewee feel at ease and accustomed to the interview. Closing questions provided an opportunity to add personal inspiration to the conversation. Between these sections, the main questions are described. First, little more detail is given on the respondents' activities within the village and how these activities contribute to their connection with the village. This is followed by more detail on the identity of the village and the connection with the village and its inhabitants. Following this, the concepts of interaction and relationships are addressed in the questions. Finally, the community feeling of the village is discussed. The interviews allow

participants to speak freely and contribute their thoughts to the conversations. Using the interview guide, during the conversations, it is possible to check whether all necessary information becomes apparent during the conversations.

The data collection took place in May and June 2023. The audio of the interviews was recorded for later transcription. The interviews took place in the villages where the participants live. The reason for this location was the researcher's expectation that the interviewees were better able to talk about the connection to the place when the participants were present in the place itself. The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Dutch. Later, the transcribed interviews were translated into English using DeepL translator software. After collecting the data, the data was transcribed and coded in the programme Atlas.ti. The analysis of the collected data took place through thematic analysis. This implies that during the coding process, certain themes are identified into which different statements will be categorised. Here, the different codes created are subsequently distributed under different themes (Caulfield, 2022). The analysis uses a partially deductive approach. The reason for this is that the literature review has already distinguished between the different concepts investigated in this research.

Ethics & Positionality

To protect the privacy, well-being and confidentiality of the participants, the personal details of the participants will not be included in the report. Different agreements were made per interviewee on what information could or could not be shared. As a result, the names of persons and streets are not disclosed. However, it might be disclosed, for example, how long the person has been living in a particular area because this is information that cannot be traced back to a single individual. In order to have an in-depth conversation with the participant the interview must be recorded – to let the researcher focus on the interview. The interview will not be recorded if the participant does not wish to be audio recorded. An additional step towards safeguarding the privacy of the participants is that after transcription, the recording of the interview will be deleted. The participant had the right to withdraw from the interview at any time. The rights of the participant will be explained by the researcher personally and provided to the participant before the interview. Discussion of the participant's rights takes place again in the recording of the conversation.

After the interview is conducted, the researcher will make sure that the participant is not left in an emotional state and that the participant has a positive feeling about the interview. It is therefore fitting for the researcher to ask if the participant is feeling well and to thank the participant for their participation since that is highly valued. Regarding positionality, the researcher is not a resident of the Noordenveld municipality and the researcher has not been to the vast majority of villages within the municipality. As a result, the researcher has no preconceived view of the social dynamics within the villages. The researcher does not live in a village known for its close community and experiences little sense of attachment to the place. The researcher ensures that the final research paper is free of plagiarism and is consistent with ethical standards in the academic community.

Data reflection

The data collected consists of transcribed interviews with four participants. Because of participant recruitment and a shift in research design during the research process, it was challenging to increase the number of participants. The participants consisted of four female interviewees. This has not been intentional but may have influenced the study. The presence of male participants might provide different insights about place attachment.

Results

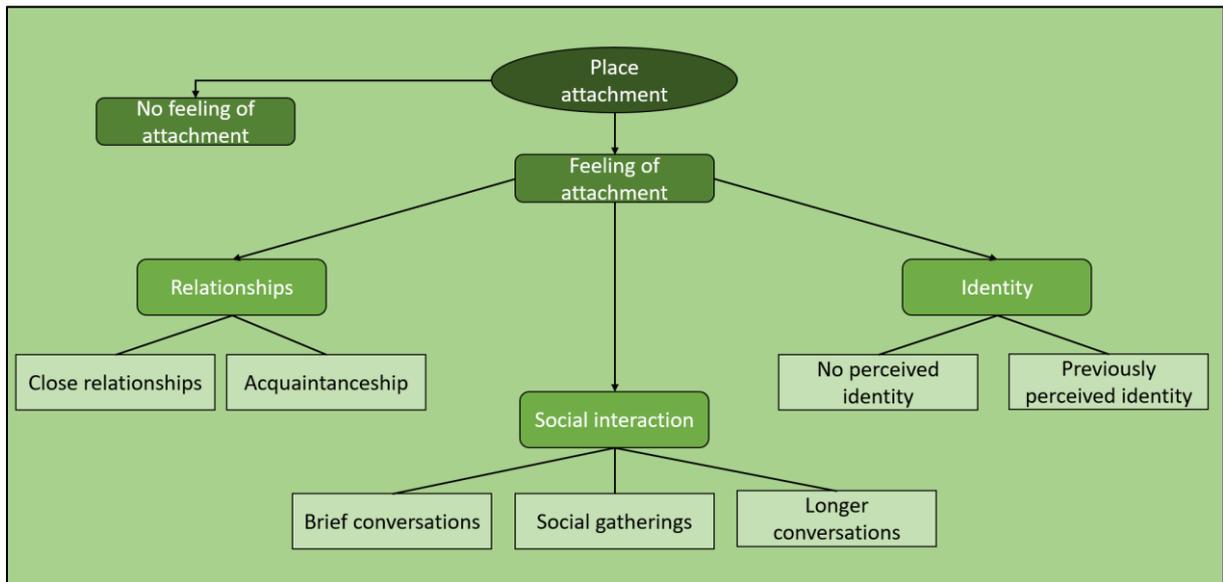


Figure 2. Code tree created by the author

The coding of the interview is done through thematic analysis where the various codes emerge from the conducted interviews. The deductive code tree (Figure 2) was constructed based on the conducted interviews and literature. From the concept of place attachment, several categories emerged based on the conceptual model. The codes described under the different components of the conceptual model have been generated out of the interviews.

A notable link is situated to the left of the main concept of place attachment and describes the situation where the participant does not feel a connection. The codes will be further clarified in the next section and the results will be described using the codes.

Indication	Gender	Residence Location	Length of stay
Participant 1	Female	Norg	46 years
Participant 2	Female	Roden	30 years
Participant 3	Female	Nietap	53 years
Participant 4	Female	Nietap	2 years

Figure 3. Participant overview.

To protect the anonymity of the participants, the participants were indicated by a labelled number. The interviews were held with four female participants from different villages within the municipality of Noordenveld. The figure includes how long the participants have been living in the different villages.

No Feeling of attachment

Scannell & Gifford (2010) describe place attachment as a commitment that may have different feelings or meanings for each individual. From this description, it can be concluded that an individual potentially has no perceived attachment to a certain place. Overall, the participants did experience attachment to a place. However, participant 2 did not indicate that she was attached to the village area. For participant 2, attachment was not an important aspect in order to make her feel at home. In comparison to other participants, participant 2 did also indicate the significance of social ties and interactions but did not link these aspects to the attachment to a place. Notably, participant 4 perceived more attachment to a village than participant 2 despite participant 4 being a resident of the village for only 2 years. The position of participant 2 and participant 4 corresponds to the established individual perception of what place attachment means (Scannell & Gifford, 2010).

Feeling of attachment

Although participant 2 indicated that she felt no attachment to the village, several elements were mentioned that corresponded to the arguments of participants 1, 3 and 4 whereby, on the contrary, a sense of being attached to the village area is present. This section will examine the components: relationships, social interactions, and identity concerning the feeling of place attachment.

Relationships

The social bonds and social ties within the village area are significant for place attachment according to the examined literature. The shared experiences and meanings are potential factors for developing a connection to a certain place. The research question related to relationships is: *What types of social interactions and relationships shape the place attachment for older adults in rural areas in the municipality of Noordenveld?* This section does focus on the relationship part of the formulated research question. From the interview data, close relationships and acquaintanceships are distinguished. This difference is characterised, among other things, by the difference in types of interactions between the two groups.

Close Relationships

Overall, the participants indicated the presence of some sort of close relationship. Participant 2 mentioned the importance of friendship with individuals as well as friendship groups. However, in most cases, the close relationships present were described as merely groups of friends and not friendships with individuals. The groups of friends are in almost every instance associated with a specific activity or related to geographical proximity in which neighbours and neighbourhood residents are described as people with whom friendships are maintained. Thus, participant 1 described the following:

"I already mentioned (name of neighbour), a neighbour of mine, and I could ask him anything, to help so to speak. I think that's friendship".

Participant 3 stresses the importance of close relationships with neighbours in the following way:

"I can't push anything up so now the neighbours have to help. Well then, I cross the road. And then they say, now you need a cup of coffee too. And then you sit there for half an hour and then they do something. And then the neighbour comes along and helps with the awnings. But that's how it works. It's not like, quick help and off you go. You stay together for a while."

Participant 2, despite being reported to lack attachment to the village, does value friendships highly.

Acquaintanceship

The answers of the respondents clearly distinguish between friendship and acquaintances. This difference is characterised, among other things, by the difference in the type of interaction and the number of acquaintances. For example, participant 1 indicates that the people she talks to frequently in the neighbourhood can be considered friends and the people with whom short conversations are exchanged in the supermarket as acquaintances. Participant 3 compares acquaintances with friendships in the following way:

"No no, I have lots of friends. And many more acquaintances of course. But I have a lot of friends. That's true. And acquaintances, yes, the whole village pretty much."

Social Interactions

Social interactions between neighbourhood residents are part of the social domain of place attachment. Within social interactions, a distinction is made between shorter conversations and longer conversations. Shorter conversations consist of small talk but greetings can equally be classified as short conversations. The longer conversations tend to be more intimate. The 'social gatherings' code is covered in addition to the conversations. Social gatherings are understood to include arrangements with friend groups as well as get-togethers with community groups and activities. Based on the obtained information on social gatherings, the research question: *'What is the perceived role of community networks in shaping place attachment for older adults in rural areas in the municipality of Noordenveld?'* will be addressed.

Brief conversations

Brief conversations and greetings are highly valued by half of the participants. The interviews with participants 1 and 4 indicate the importance of brief conversations and greetings. The brief conversations are related to acquaintanceships whereas the longer conversations are related to close relationships. Participant 4 values the brief conversations because of past personal experiences and because of previous residential locations where brief conversations and greetings did not occur as frequently as in her new living area.

“Truly everyone greets each other. At the moment I have two dogs to take care of for my brother. And when you are out and about with the dogs, you automatically make contact with strangers. (...) People have time for a chat. And normally you walk past each other. And because of the dogs you stop for a moment.” (Participant 4).

Participant 4 values the brief conversations due to the perceived bond between the inhabitants. According to participant 4, the brief conversations acknowledge each other as fellow residents.

Participants 2 and 3 acknowledge the importance of brief conversations and greetings to a lesser extent. Whereas participant 2 values longer conversations with friends, participant 3 does recognise the value of brief conversations. However, for participant 3, the shorter conversations serve the purpose of friend-making where a more intimate relationship can be formed within the village.

Longer conversations

Overall, the participants value longer conversations. The longer conversations are analysed in connection to closer relationships with whom more intimate conversations are held. Longer conversations for participant 3 consist of conversations full of emotion where anything really can be talked about. According to her, the older group of the village is getting to the age where more and more ailments arise and where people can use the help within the village. This includes longer conversations where an emotional connection can be maintained.

“And we tell each other a lot. When she is having a hard time she comes, and when I am having a hard time. We have just now been informed that my husband has oesophageal cancer. And ehh yes that's really worrying. And you ehh sometimes don't have to discuss that with your husband. And preferably then with someone else. (...) Yes, that's where I go. Or she to me. Her husband just died and then we look for each other and not for half an hour. No, we stay for dinner.” (Participant 3)

Despite participant 2 stating that there is no connection with the village, conversations with groups of friends within the village are highly valued.

Research question

By examining the interview results of the relationships and social interaction an answer can be formulated for the research question: *‘What types of social interactions and relationships shape the place attachment for older adults in rural areas in the municipality of Noordenveld?’* The interviews reveal that the participants' attachment to the village is primarily related to relationships with other residents. These findings are in line with Altman and Low (1992) who claim that social relations may be more significant in the attachment process than just the place. Different relationships are characterised by different types of interactions. People who regard each other as acquaintances have more volatile conversations, according to the interviews. Intimate conversations take place with people the residents consider friends. It is therefore true that short interactions with acquaintances lead to friendships where longer conversations occur. This is also reflected in a story by participant 3 which reveals that a conversation in the supermarket with another woman who was just new to the area led to a close friendship.

“So then you get this contact by talking to people in a shop. If I hadn't done that, I would never have had that contact with her. Huh, but she doesn't. She also kind of came from the Randstad, that area. (...) Well, I still have contact with her. If she comes here in the neighbourhood then she will definitely come by. She won't bypass my house.” (Participant 3).

The findings are consistent with the literature of Ilovan & Markuszewska (2022) where place attachment is described to be shaped by the social interactions that define the emotional connection

between individuals. The answer to the research question is multifaceted. The significance of friendship is perceived to be more prominent than acquaintances in constituting connections. Furthermore, shorter conversations with acquaintances and greeting strangers within the village are valued. Longer conversations are more indicative of close friendships within the village.

Social gatherings

The social gatherings consist of meetings of different communities and activities. Often, social gatherings are associated with close relationships and longer interactions. In general, respondents consider the gatherings to be very important for feeling about the neighbourhood because it fosters interactions and friendships. For participant 1, the local football club is the meeting place of the regular group of friends. Participant 3 and 4 are part of a group that meets once a week and for these participants, these gatherings are keeping the village community together.

“This day is sacred to me. Nothing else takes its place. Because it's so great. In the beginning, everything was a bit stiff. Nobody dared to say anything, well we started the chatterbox and now you can hear what's being chatted about.” (Participant 4).

For participant 3, the weekly meeting is of significance because it is among the remaining meetings after Covid-19 and the changes in the social dynamics of the village. Participant 2 and participant 3 link this change in social dynamics to new people in the village and both call this 'import'. These are mostly new residents who make little effort to connect with the original residents.

Research question

‘What is the perceived role of community networks in shaping place attachment for older adults in rural areas in the municipality of Noordenveld?’

The role of community networks can be interpreted by examining the importance of social interactions and relationships in the perception of place attachment. Community networks as meeting places for social gatherings are important for shaping place attachment as community networks facilitate occasions for meetings where close friends can conduct longer conversations.

Identity

The concept of identity affects attachment to a place due to the sense of belonging. The identity of a place is ascribed by the individuals living in the area. When asked about the identity of the village and villagers, various responses were obtained. Analysis of the data revealed that it was a difficult topic for the participants. Answers were provided about the kindness of the participants' immediate surroundings. The link to characteristics that distinguish the village was not made by the participants when asked about identity. The participants did mention characteristics attributed to the village population but did not identify the characteristics when specifically asked about the concept of identity. Therefore, it is difficult to define these characteristics as the identity of the village or villagers because, according to the perception of the participants, it is not related to the identity of the village.

Previously perceived identity

Participant 2 comments on the previous identity when asked about the identity of the village of Roden. The participant explains that the village could previously be identified as a politically red village but not necessarily a cohesive one. Participant 2 believes the blurring of identity derives from the influx of a new group of residents.

No perceived identity

In general, participants had difficulty conceiving the identity of the village. Although participant 4 states that she has not lived in the village long enough to experience an identity, her response is consistent with participant 3. According to both participants, a single identity within the village is difficult to distinguish as the population is mixed and varied.

Research question

The absence of a clear identity of the village or villagers is not consistent with the literature previously described. For instance, it was described how residents form a connection with a place in which their

own identity is reflected and that can be related to the identity of a village (Brewer, 1991). The absence of a distinct perceived identity in the data may be related to the phrasing of the concept of identity as identity consists of characteristics ascribed by a single individual to a specific region (Rijnks & Strijker, 2013). The lack of a distinct identity could also derive from the population diversity described by participant 3 and participant 4. The absence of a dominant or homogeneous culture, values, or characteristics may make it difficult for individuals to define a collective identity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research focused on the concept of place attachment in rural areas, specifically exploring the role of social interactions, relationships, and identity in shaping the perception of place attachment among older adults in the municipality of Noordenveld. The findings of the study revealed that overall, the participants experienced a sense of attachment to their respective villages. The analysis of the data identified several factors that contributed to this feeling of attachment.

First, relationships were found to play a significant role, with participants highlighting the importance of close relationships with groups of friends and neighbours. These relationships provided a sense of support, belonging, and shared experiences, which contributed to the participants' attachment to their villages. Friendships were considered to be more important in the research compared to having many acquaintances within the village. Associated with resident relationships are the varying degrees of interactions. For half of the participants, deeper conversations had been considered more important while the other half instead valued greetings and shorter conversations as more important in shaping connections with the village. With this information, the first sub-question "*What types of social interactions and relationships shape the place attachment for older adults in rural areas in the municipality of Noordenveld?*" has been addressed.

The second research question is stated: "*What is the perceived role of community networks in shaping place attachment for older adults in rural areas in the municipality of Noordenveld?*". The participants perceive social gatherings as a contributing factor to their place attachment as the gatherings facilitate meetings with community networks within the rural context. The role of community networks is associated with the close relationships and accompanying longer conversations perceived as important by participants under the previous research question. Furthermore, the connection between the participants' perceived identity of the area and place attachment was not identified. For the third sub-question "*What is the perceived role of the identity of an area in shaping place attachment for older adults in rural areas in the municipality of Noordenveld?*" it can therefore be concluded that the expected role of identity arising from the literature was not met.

The central question "*How do social interactions, relationships, and identity in rural areas in the northern Netherlands shape the place attachment of older adults?*" is examined based on the sub-questions. The conclusion based on the findings is that according to the participants in the municipality of Noordenveld, close relationships combined with longer conversations are highly valued in forming an attachment to the place. Having many acquaintances is considered less significant, nevertheless, the associated brief interactions and greetings are considered to be important for a part of the participants. However, the data collected does not demonstrate a significant correlation between place attachment and the identity of the place, which contradicts the literature on the role of identity.

The findings of the study contain practical implications. The sample size was small due to contingencies during the data collection process, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, difficulties were encountered in the participant recruitment process which led to the decision to focus on a single municipality as opposed to a single village. Although the villages do coincide within one municipality, the villages differ in population numbers, for example, which could affect the findings emerging from the data.

Further research could take into account the limitations of this research. To further advance the understanding of place attachment in rural areas, future research could expand the sample size and include a more diverse range of participants. In doing so, the focus would be on increasing the number of participants within a single village. It would be interesting to include further research on other age groups as opposed to this research which focused on the older demographic. Longitudinal studies could also be conducted to explore the dynamics of place attachment over time. Additionally, policymakers and practitioners can use the findings of this study to inform interventions and initiatives that promote social interactions, relationships, and the development of a positive place identity to enhance place attachment in rural communities.

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Appendix

Appendix A – Interview Guide

The conducted interviews will help to analyse personal experiences of social interactions and relationships in rural areas shaping place attachment. In the following section, the questions made for the interview are laid out, following a qualitative narrative. The interview will start with several opening questions, meant to break the ice and get the conversation going with the respondent. Then, the main questions are addressed, the questions that are made to get useful and relevant information for the research. The interview will be finished with several closing questions that ensure that the respondent felt at ease during the interview and will leave with a certain satisfaction. The respondent has the opportunity to address anything that may be unclear before the interview is finalized. The interviews will be conducted in Dutch but will be translated by online software afterwards.

Opening Questions

1. *What village do you live in and for how long?*
2. *How would you describe your village/ area?*
3. *What is your favourite thing about the village/area?*

Probes: What is the thing about the village you like the least?

Main Questions

1. *What activities or communities are you involved in connected to the village/area?*

Probes: In what ways do these activities and communities contribute to connection with other inhabitants of the village?

2. *How would you describe the identity of the villagers of (PLACE NAME)?*

Probes: do you feel that most of the inhabitants fit this identity?

3. *In what way do the other inhabitants play a role in your connection to the village/area?*
4. *Do you have a lot of interaction with other inhabitants? If yes, in what way?*

Probes: What is the most important way of socializing with the other inhabitants for you?

5. *In what ways do you think the people in the area are connected to one another?*

Probes: Can you give some examples? Do you interact with some inhabitants more than with other inhabitants?

6. *How do you feel about your relationships with other inhabitants?*

Probes: How would you describe this relationship?

Closing Questions

1. *Is there something else about the village that you feel is important for how you feel connected? To make you feel at home?*
2. *Do you have anything else to add?*

Probes: Do you have any questions? Is anything unclear?