

ELFSTEDENTOCHT & FRISIAN REGIONAL IDENTITY



Gathering oral histories with
Elfstedentocht participants

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The Elfstedentocht and the Frisian regional identity

An exploration of the significance of the Elfstedentocht of 1985 for the Frisian regional
 identity

Master thesis - Cultural Geography: Sustainable Tourism & Society

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Abstract

This thesis explores the significance of the Elfstedentocht of 1985 for the Frisian regional identity. The Elfstedentocht is an ice skating marathon, visiting all eleven cities of the province of Friesland, the Netherlands. The tour can only be organised when ice conditions permit, which has only happened 15 times officially since 1909. While ice skating is part of the broader Dutch culture, the Elfstedentocht has Frisian roots and can only take place there. By conducting oral histories with participants of the Elfstedentocht, it was investigated to what extent their memories of that day include elements of the Frisian identity. The findings reveal that the Elfstedentocht embodies Frisian identity through the Frisian language used, the landscape they skate through, and a sense of community that persists during the event. Besides reflecting identity characteristics, it is also found that the Elfstedentocht is a moment when the Frisian identity is promoted, as Friesland receives both national and international attention on that day boosting the Frisian identity. Furthermore, it can be observed that this Dutch cultural heritage is threatened by global warming, leading to the disappearance of part of the cultural identity of the Netherlands. Therefore, narratives related to this event should be preserved. It is recommended to carry out future research on the significance of the Elfstedentocht for the Frisian identity according to the youth.

Key words: *Elfstedentocht, Regional Identity, Friesland, Cultural Heritage*

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1.1 BACKGROUND

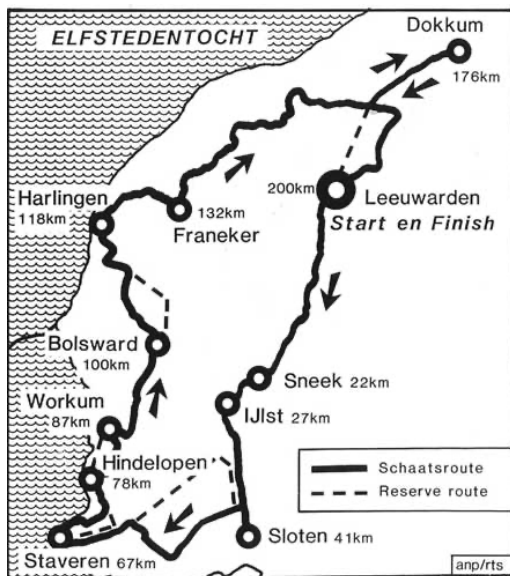


Figure 1: Elfstedentocht route (Metronieuws, 2020)

Up until the 19th century, waterways were often the natural means for travelling longer distances in the Netherlands. In the winter, when these waterways froze, people made their way across the ice on skates. Over time, skating turned from a logistical necessity into a recreational activity (Brinkhof, 2023). By 1900, this practice evolved into a competitive form, initiating the beginning of a modern tradition, the ‘Elfstedentocht’ (Betten, 2013). The Elfstedentocht is

an almost 200-kilometer-long ice skating tour organised by the Royal Association of the Frisian Eleven Cities. It takes place in Friesland, one of the twelve provinces of the Netherlands, and is known as the ‘Tour of Tours’ due to its challenging distance and often harsh weather conditions. As can be seen in *Figure 1*, the Tour starts and finishes in Leeuwarden, while following a route passing ten other Frisian cities and getting a card stamped there to verify their passage.

According to Betten (2013), the Elfstedentocht is more than just a challenging skating tour and even more than what we like to call intangible heritage. It is a modern myth.

‘There is no sport in the Netherlands as universally practised as ice skating. Once you have seen ice skating in Friesland, you might be inclined to think that the Frisians are born on skates. Every Frisian can skate, and how!’, was stated in a Dutch newspaper on December 23rd, 1933 (Lolkama, 2008 p.73).

Lolkama (2008) states that in old annals, Friesland is often described as the Mecca of ice skating. For centuries, ice skating has been passionately cherished in this area. However, Friesland being the central place where ice skating started can be questioned. One year before the first Elfstedentocht, Japan organised the first ice skating marathon, and there are mentions of a Twaalfstedentocht (twelve-city tour) from 1676 in the Dutch province Noord-Holland. Despite this, ice skating is considered something ‘traditional Frisian’, and it is stated that the fact that nowhere else an ice skating tour of over two hundred kilometres on natural ice can be found cannot be a coincidence (Jensma & Breuker, 2009; van de Vooren, 2019). On the other hand, it is also a nationally shared practice which transformed into the symbol of Dutch ice recreation in the 20th century (Lolkama, 2008).

The first official Tour was organised in 1909 and marked the start of a classic of which only fifteen could be organised in over a hundred years. This is because the Elfstedentocht is dependent on the weather. The challenge of securing sufficiently thick ice to support over 25.000 skaters is increasingly becoming an exception these days (Kenyon, 2024). Therefore, this event faces the threat of oblivion due to increasingly mild winters, as a direct consequence of climate change. The Royal Netherlands Meteorological Institute reports a decline in the annual chance of the Tour from once in the five years at the beginning of the 20th century, to once in the twelve years now (KNMI, 2023). It is also suggested that if global warming persists, the odds could drop to a mere one per cent by 2050.

Furthermore, the Elfstedentocht takes a significant stand in the history of sports. Every sport has its classics, which can bring parts of societal life to a standstill. The Elfstedentocht is regarded as such an event and is discussed among renowned sports classics such as Wimbledon, the Oxford-Cambridge Boat Race, the New York Marathon, and the Tour de France, to name just a few (Lolkama, 2008). With a first mention of an Elfstedentocht in 1749, it makes it one

of the oldest classics in the world. Due to it being such a renowned sports event, it can be an important moment to highlight and boost regional identity (Devolder, 2023).

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

In an era marked by rapid global changes, including globalisation, migration, and the universal reach of mass media, there is a growing reflection on the essence of ‘our’ identity (Diemen, 2010). Traditions like the Elfstedentocht, which seem authentic and unaltered over time, might serve as stable cultural points, helping communities deal with the rapid changes around them. In the face of globalisation, regional identity is undergoing transformations that are aimed at cultural unification (Sagan et al., 2020). Traditions and cultural heritage, like the Elfstedentocht, not only foster a sense of belonging, but are also increasingly used to express and reinforce (local) identity amidst the global flux (Trienekens et al., 2016).

To preserve the cultural heritage of the Elfstedentocht, the documentation of personal narratives is essential. Engelshoven (2018) states that cultural heritage is a dynamic entity, experienced collectively and evolving continually. It is something that binds communities. Moreover, participant’s stories contain life lessons for generations to come, as they often contain important values like togetherness, dealing with ups and downs, and community spirit (Sijtsma, 2023). Betten (2013) argues that the unique aspect of the Elfstedentocht is that everyone has their version of it, as the feelings, the memories, and the collection of associations with the Tour are very personal.

If the Elfstedentocht indeed remains absent, there will be a gradual fading of first-hand witnesses. This necessitates capturing these valuable narratives and preserving them while we still can, ensuring the link to the past will be maintained and the legacy of the Elfstedentocht remains vibrant (Hoogbergen, 2021). Events may function as occasions to express collective belonging to a group or a place and provide opportunities to create united histories, cultural

practices, and ideals (Jæger & Mykletun, 2013). It will be investigated whether the Elfstedentocht can be regarded as such an event through the narratives of those who participated.

1.3 ACADEMIC RELEVANCE

Until now, research on the Elfstedentocht has focused on the probability of holding an outdoor skating marathon in a changing climate (Visser & Petersen, 2009), the Elfstedentocht and the media (Bosch, 2016), and on the Elfstedentocht as cultural intangible heritage (Diemen, 2010). This study addresses a gap in the existing literature by focusing on the personal narratives of participants and relating this to the broader concept of regional identity.

In the academic literature related to this topic, there is a lack of first-hand accounts and personal narratives, which often offer a deeper understanding of individual experiences. Exploring participant's perceptions explains the cultural significance of the event from the standpoint of those directly involved, ensuring that these personal stories are preserved and continue to speak for them when they are gone. To make sure future historians will not be generalising and stereotyping people from the past, stories with individual experiences will be valuable (Baylor University Institute for Oral History, 2016).

1.4 SOCIETAL RELEVANCE

This study holds societal relevance as it contributes to the preservation of cultural memory. By capturing and safeguarding personal narratives associated with the Elfstedentocht, the research makes sure that part of this heritage will not be forgotten as time passes. Also, these stories serve as a valuable educational resource, as they offer insight into this specific event. Furthermore, the absence of severe winters threatens the Dutch skating culture, which should receive more attention (Pauw, 2024).

This research will delve into the narratives of participants to gain a deeper understanding of the event's significance for the Frisian identity. Through storytelling, people not only interpret and appreciate places but also endow these places with a sense of their own cultural identities (Jæger & Mykletun, 2013).

1.5 OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTION

The objective of this study is to explore how the 1985 Elfstedentocht has reflected and formulated the regional identity of Friesland. By analysing first-hand accounts from those who took part in the race, the study aims to uncover how this ice skating event not only serves as a sporting challenge but also as a cultural touchstone that reinforces and perhaps even shapes the communal and regional identity of the Frisian people. The focus will be on identifying themes and sentiments expressed by participants that reflect the cultural attributes linked to this event.

This research adopts the following research question: **What is the significance of 1985s Elfstedentocht for the Frisian regional identity? Gathering oral histories with participants**

The questions that follow from the main question are:

- What defines regional identity and which factors contribute to its formation?
- To what extent do participants' experiences of the Elfstedentocht of 1985 say something about the Frisian regional identity?
- How does the Elfstedentocht of 1985 reflect or formulate the Frisian regional identity?

1.6 READING GUIDE

This thesis is structured into five chapters. The topic has been introduced in the first chapter. The second chapter will delve deeper into defining and discussing the key concepts. Chapter three elaborates on the research methods used and reflects on the quality of the data. In the

fourth chapter, the findings of the study are presented and analysed. The final chapter will answer the main question, offer reflections on the research conducted, and suggest directions for future studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

ICE SKATING AND THE NETHERLANDS

Where and when ice skating originates from is not known. Around 1200 there were mentions of wooden skates with metal runners, an invention that started the success of ice skating. By the end of the 15th century, skaters began to appear in paintings, indicating that skating had become a societal phenomenon. These winter landscapes significantly shaped the international image of the Netherlands as a skating nation (Andere Tijden, 2016). Following the Reformation, the epicentre of the skating culture shifted from the southern part to the northern part of the Netherlands, with the burgeoning Republic embracing this leisure as a unique aspect of its culture. It is the egalitarian character of ice skating that makes it a folk culture, as every citizen can partake in this activity, fostering temporary equity (Hoogbergen, 2021).

The special position that ice amusement began to occupy around 1600 in the Netherlands can also be attributed to the resident's unique relationship with water. With the introduction of modern engineering techniques to combat the sea, skating gave the Dutch a sense of conquering their enemy (Andere Tijden, 2016). Additionally, due to water being a national unifier and the fact that all layers of the society come together, skating makes people experience an intense sense of collectivity (Bosch, 2016). At the end of the 17th century, when the winters warmed, ice amusement receded into the background as a social phenomenon. However, the emerging industrial elite of the 19th century returned to the ice, ensuring that ice amusement remained an integral part of the national culture (Andere Tijden, 2016). The mobility on the ice combined

with the social opportunities this provided, formed an important incentive for the ice skating tradition in Friesland and the Netherlands (Hoogbergen, 2021).

REGIONAL IDENTITY

In our diverse world, regions are not merely geographical areas, they are dynamic spaces where a multitude of factors converge to shape identity and belonging. As described by Johnston et al. (2006), regions possess distinct organising principles that set them apart from neighbouring areas, encompassing not only physical geographical but also socio-economic, cultural, and political dimensions. Regional identity has been recognised as a key element in the making of regions as social and political spaces. Paasi (2003) argues that narratives of regional identity can lean on various elements, such as

‘Ideas on nature, landscape, the built environment, culture/ethnicity, dialects, economic success/recession, periphery/centre relations, marginalization, stereotypic images of a people/community, both of ‘us’ and ‘them’, actual/invented histories, utopias, and diverging arguments on the identification of people’ (p.477).

Defining a region requires it to be distinguishable from other neighbouring regions (Rijnks & Strijker, 2013). This distinctiveness can be based on various factors such as geographical features, cultural practices, or historical backgrounds. Furthermore, a region is recognised as such when it is acknowledged by national states, international organisations, other regions, and individuals (Rijnks & Strijker, 2013). Recognition is thus essential for a region’s legitimacy and identity.

Regions are not static as they evolve over time. They may merge with other areas or break into smaller parts, reflecting political, economic, or social changes (Paasi, 2011). This dynamic nature highlights the fluidity of regional boundaries and identities. Additionally, regions often adopt ‘national’ symbols like flags and anthems, which serve as markers of identity and pride

(van Langenhove, 2013). These symbols help unify the people within the region and distinguish them from those in other regions. Therefore, it can be said that regions are socially constructed entities (van Langenhove, 2013). Their boundaries, symbols and significance are the result of human interaction and collective agreement. Regions are thus the product of shared understandings and practices, continuously shaped by the people who live there and recognise them.

When relating this to regional identity, a region is considered a territory with which an individual identifies. Such a region can differ in people's minds and may not coincide with administratively defined units (Andel et al., 2019). The concept of regional identity mainly refers to the regional consciousness of individuals and is based on collective narratives about what 'our' region looks like and how it differs from others (Paasi, 2002). Individuals and communities conceive their identity based on collective memory, which promotes heroic narratives and shared experiences (Popescu & Alba, 2022). Pohl (2001) argues that regional identity is the feeling of being at home or belonging to an area on a mesoscale, resulting from close ties between an individual and a region. Therefore, regional identity can vary in intensity, ranging from a vague sense of belonging to strong commitment and active involvement. In each case, the region influences a person's behaviour (Pohl, 2001). Paasi (2011) states that both the territorial shape and the symbolic elements contribute to shaping the region and constructing narratives of identity.

Additionally, a region can operate as a generator and communicator of identity (van Langenhove, 2013). People born and living within the region's boundaries share an identity that forms the basis for collective interest, transcending internal differences. This identity is grounded in regional history, the surrounding landscape, language, shared symbols, narratives, and other specific regionally bound conditions (Pohl, 2001). Cultivating a collective sense of belonging among inhabitants is essential in shaping regional identity, as highlighted by Paasi

(2002). Experiences and social interactions play a significant role in developing and changing regional identity (Pohl, 2001).

Kunst (2015) emphasizes the importance of collective stories, often derived from history, in creating group identity. However, the construction of identity is complex. Egberts (2015) underscores that the selection of which heritage and stories to embrace is often filled with political tensions and contested narratives. Additionally, broader trends such as uneven development, threats to regional languages and cultures, and national devolution contribute to the evolving landscape of regional identities (Anderson, 2000).

Regional identity is thus socially constructed and everyday experiences and interactions shape attitudes towards the region (Pohl, 2001). The identity of a place is primarily the meaning that an individual attaches to it, reflecting the personal significance that a region holds for a group or an individual (Kunst, 2015). This applies to both people within and outside the region. Essentially, regions are dynamic spaces where identity is negotiated, contested, and reshaped. Being connected through territory and symbols makes regions central points of community and belonging in a changing world.

FRISIAN IDENTITY

Identity is established in complex societal processes and expresses itself in a complex interplay of culture, memory, art and design, language, sports and games, festivals, and rituals (Betten, 2013). Although the Frisian identity is difficult to define, Jensma (2010) argues that until just a few decades ago, language, history and a sense of community were the main pillars of Frisian identity.

According to Mahmood & Armstrong (1992), there exists no single Frisian identity. They argue that even though certain characteristics are considered Frisian, there are certainly also many differences regarding identity. Two persons may not have certain characteristics in common,

but they can both be defined as Frisian. Therefore, it can be argued that identity is a social process (Paasi, 2003), as being Frisian means something different to everyone and everyone attributes different characteristics to it. According to de Boer (2014), defining a single Frisian identity is indeed a difficult, even impossible, task. However, traditionally, Frisians were characterised by the language they spoke, and this was their main mean of expressing their identity. By creating a group that distinguishes itself from other groups, the Frisians have managed to maintain their identities for centuries. Although there is a strong tendency to view the Frisian identity as unchanging and static (Betten, 2013), it is undeniable to argue that the developments throughout the centuries have not impacted the Frisian society and identity.

Whereas in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Friesland enjoyed an exceptional political position in Europe, marked by freedom from feudal lordship forming the cornerstone of the Frisian identity in the Middle Ages (Looper, 2018), this significantly changed when Friesland lost its autonomy and became a province within the new unitary state (Jensma, 2002). When much is changing, the self-evident nature of one's own identity comes into question (Betten, 2013). It is then logical to wonder who you are and with whom you feel connected.

The 19th century saw the reinvention of the Frisian language, culture and identity under the influence of Romanticism. This phenomenon was not unique to Friesland, similar mechanisms of invented traditions occurred in many other European regions, especially where the people and the nation-state did not smoothly coexist (Betten, 2013). The rise of invented traditions, defined by Hobsbawm (2014) as practices full of rituals and symbols meant to repeat certain values and behaviours, making it seem like they continue from the past, could be observed. These traditions were used to create and establish symbolic cohesion and continuity with a suitable historic past by taking the form of reference to old situations.

The Netherlands appealed to their ice skating folk culture (Diemen, 2010). Where skating along the eleven cities of Friesland was already a local tradition, adding a competitive aspect and official regulations turned this custom into an event. When this event became a local success among the Frisians and therefore entangled with the Frisian identity, it was soon promoted into a national cultural expression of the Dutch identity on an international scale (Diemen, 2010).

However, there is a strong sense of community that persists throughout Friesland's history. The Frisian term *mienskip* encompasses this mutual connectedness which originates from times when the Frisians battled against the water and united their strengths to collectively build mounds and dikes (Fries Sociaal Planbureau, 2016). Besides, *mienskip* also arose from the isolation of the villages. Therefore, the community in these villages depended on each other, fostering a sense of connection, as together they were self-reliant (van der Meulen, n.d.). Today, in Friesland, people's social network is on average larger and more robust than elsewhere, with high trust in each other, and helping each other (Fries Sociaal Planbureau, 2020).

LANDSCAPE

In recent decades, the focus of identity formation has shifted from history and language to the landscape (Jensma, 2010). Identity is strongly linked to memories and the environment, with landscapes reflecting both aspects (Betten, 2013). Collective memories often have a strong spatial reference because every significant social event occurs in a particular place, which often gains the same importance as the event itself. Enache & Craciun (2013) suggest that landscapes, whether urban or natural, provide important elements that communities recognise and identify with. Conversely, the distinct identities of these landscapes are shaped by the cultural and social traditions of their inhabitants. For instance, variations in cultural practices, social structures, and historical traditions lead to the creation of unique landscapes that are specific to each community (Seidl et al., 2021).

Each landscape has its own identity which is based on three aspects: its physical characteristics, the processes occurring within it, and the meanings people attach to it (Renes, 2014). Landscapes can evoke strong emotions partly because memories are often tied to specific places (Renes, 2014). When recalling an event, the memory frequently includes an image of the associated location. However, people have different interests and perspectives regarding landscapes, leading to varied interpretations and interactions with them. The new cultural geography asserts that personal and collective backgrounds influence the importance individuals attribute to a landscape, making a single definition of landscape an illusion (Kunst, 2015). Landscapes are therefore deeply personal and reflect the culture, nature, and history of the area, making them social products (Howard, 2011).

When talking about the Frisian landscape, it becomes challenging to pinpoint a specific Frisian landscape (Renes, 2014). On the one hand, because there are no landscapes unique to Friesland; on the other hand, all Frisian landscapes also extend into other provinces. Despite this, research done by the Fries Sociaal Planbureau found that the Frisian landscape is highly significant to the Frisian identity, ranking second in importance by the Frisians themselves (Leeuwarder Courant, 2016). The Frisian landscape is thus not just a physical presence but exists primarily in our minds and perceptions (Jensma, 2010), and the meaning we assign to this landscape is inseparable from our personal and collective histories. This makes the landscape ultimately a construction of society (Jensma, 2010).

SPORTS & HERITAGE

Identity can also be established through and expressed in sports. Besides shaping identity, sport also serves as an expression of culture and nationalism. Furthermore, by evoking emotions and passions, sports events create deep-seated patterns of identification, making them significant sites of memories (Pinson, 2017).

According to Rewijk (2017), Friesland has a few so-called ‘cultural sports’, which are sports in which a sporting element is combined with a cultural element. These sports have been used as an expression of Frisian identity and preserve the regional culture. One of these sports is ice skating, with the Elfstedentocht as its most widely known event. The Elfstedentocht characterises this blend of sport and culture and is not merely an athletic competition but a cultural heritage event. The ability of an event to create a link between an activity and a territory is important when considering it a heritage sporting event (Chappelet, 2015).

Chappelet (2015) argues that every heritage sporting event results from inventing a tradition that symbolises the social cohesion, identity, and local expertise of the area. Furthermore, these events must be distinguished by their authenticity, which is built through myths, anecdotes, and particular traditions surrounding the event (Pinson, 2017). Therefore, from both a sports perspective and the cultural significance of ice skating, the Elfstedentocht serves as an expression of regional identity. However, besides identifying with this heritage, participants of the Tour also strongly identify with other participants since part of their identity is constructed by the experiences and memories they share (Koolhaas, 2010). This highlights the importance of these intangible elements in reinforcing the cultural heritage and collective identity associated with the Elfstedentocht.

The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage defines intangible heritage as:

‘Practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts, and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage’ (UNESCO, 2003).

Intangible cultural heritage, passed down through generations, is continually reshaped by communities in response to their surroundings, interactions, and historical context. This heritage forms a crucial part of their identity and continuity. The significance of intangible heritage in shaping identities is widely recognised (UNESCO, 2003). The 2003 Convention opened the possibility for sports events to be listed as cultural heritage, yet to date, only three events have been inscribed so far (Pinson, 2017).

Although sports events are infrequently inscribed on UNESCO's list, the potential for inclusion highlights their cultural value beyond mere competition. In July 2017, ice skating on natural ice was officially added to the inventory of the Dutch Centre of Intangible Cultural Heritage (Kenniscentrum Immaterieel Erfgoed Nederland, n.d.). This recognition emphasises the role of ice skating not just as a sport but as a cultural tradition deeply embedded in the Dutch culture. Heritage, as Egberts (2015) suggests, plays a crucial role in shaping regional identities, offering insights into the connection between a region and its history (Wicke, 2019).

Ice skating not only fosters a sense of identity at the regional level but also helps the Dutch connect with their folk culture. Due to the rise of television, the Elfstedentocht transformed from a regional sports event into a national event (Lolkama, 2008). According to Scholten (2022), this increased visibility is what made the sports event evolve into cultural heritage. This increased media coverage created a shared national experience, fostering a collective sense of pride and identity. According to Koolhaas (2010), the Elfstedentocht and the anticipation surrounding it are best seen as a communal act where the group celebrates its own identity and unity. Internationally, it also served to distinguish Dutch from other nationalities, illustrating the various layers of identification that this heritage invokes (Koolhaas, 2010).

CLIMATE CHANGE

However, according to Brinkhof (2023), global warming has already erased a key part of Dutch culture, skating on natural ice. Since the beginning of the last century, winters in the Netherlands have become warmer, diminishing the likelihood of large-scale skating events taking place in the Netherlands, such as the Elfstedentocht (Compendium voor de Leefomgeving, 2020). According to the KNMI, the annual chance of the Tour taking place has decreased from 20 to 8 per cent in the last hundred years. And they predict that when global warming continues at its current pace the odds will be diminished to just one per cent by 2050 (Oldenborgh et al., 2019).

When looking specifically at the Elfstedentocht, it has only been possible to organise an official Elfstedentocht 15 times since 1909. To date, the Elfstedentocht has not taken place for over 27 years, making this the longest period between two Elfstedentochten (van de Vooren, 2019), in which people have only been dreaming of a new Tour (Behne, 2024). To prevent this heritage from disappearing, we must pay attention to and keep talking about this event.

The Dutch national character has a whole at its centre, as there is an entire generation that has never learned to skate because there simply has not been natural ice for them to skate on (Brinkhof, 2023). Whereas skating used to be one of those skills you automatically acquired when you grew up in the Netherlands, this has become rarer. Pauw (2024) emphasizes that while many consider the impacts of climate change primarily in economic terms, the true price of the climate crisis is not measurable in monetary terms alone. It is the cultural identity of nations that is about to disappear. Intangible heritage gives us a sense of identity and continuity (UNESCO, n.d.), which we will now lose.

HYPOTHESIS

Based on the literature it is expected to find that the Elfstedentocht holds significance for reflecting the Frisian identity. Despite there not being a single Frisian identity, certain characteristics, like the local language, are expected to be reflected in the event. However, whether the participants of the Tour experienced this has not been investigated and will thus be researched. Additionally, given the strong regional pride associated with hosting such an event, it is hypothesised that expressions of regional identity will be displayed using local languages, flags, and anthems during the Elfstedentocht and that these have been noticed by the participants of the Elfstedentocht of 1985.

METHODOLOGY

2.1 OPERATIONALISATION

In this research, a qualitative approach will be employed to delve into participants' experiences and perceptions of the Elfstedentocht of 1985. Qualitative research is chosen for its ability to capture the nuances of individuals' thoughts and feelings, which might be challenging to quantify accurately (Tenny et al., 2022). This method allows for a deep exploration of personal narratives and memories, providing an understanding of the event's impact on regional identity. One of qualitative research's strengths lies in its ability to tell a story from the perspective of those directly involved. Spoken sources provide insight into how the past is remembered and the significance attributed to specific events, which is crucial for understanding how history shapes identity (van der Zon, 2016).

ORAL HISTORIES METHODOLOGY

Oral histories involve recorded dialogues between a researcher and participants, aiming to document a series of past experiences. This method gathers, preserves, and interprets memories,

offering unique and personal insights into historical events. Unlike short, focused interviews that target specific information, oral histories provide a broader understanding of historical narratives and contribute to creating a living archive that connects generations and strengthens cultural roots, by letting the respondent tell what they want to tell without too much interruptions (Hay & Cope, 2021).

Oral histories are particularly appropriate for this research as they ensure that memories from the Elfstedentocht are preserved and made available to future generations. Besides, they can serve as a form of self-expression, by playing a role in reinforcing and safeguarding identity (Harlov-Csotán). Popescu & Alba (2022) suggest that individuals and communities conceive their identities through collective memory, promoting heroic narratives, and shared experiences. Furthermore, conducting oral histories enables the researcher to explore how individuals and their communities both embrace shared identities and histories (Nyhan & Flinn, 2016).

Given the absence of a set number of participants required for oral history projects (Hay & Cope, 2021), five oral histories have been conducted for this research. This approach is chosen to accommodate time constraints and to minimize bias that could arise from relying on a single interview.

PARTICIPANT SELECTION AND SAMPLING

Participants were selected using the snowball method, which begins with one or more participants and continues based on referrals until the desired sample size is reached (Nikolopoulou, 2023). This method is suitable for hard-to-reach populations and when populations are small relative to the general population. The first participant, chosen for convenience, was my father. He directed me to a woman involved in ‘The Tocht’, a musical about the Elfstedentocht in Leeuwarden, who in turn introduced me to participants of the

Elfstedentocht, currently volunteering at the musical. Among them, four had participated in the 1985 Elfstedentocht. Although the fifth participant did not take part in the 1985 Tour, he completed the 1997 edition and had extensive knowledge of Dutch ice skating history, making his inclusion in the study valuable. The interviews were conducted along the *Zwette*, the waters where the start of the Elfstedentocht is located, to evoke memories and create a favourable atmosphere for recalling past experiences.

DATA ANALYSIS

Before the interviews, background research was conducted, and a list of topics was created based on the theoretical framework. The recording equipment was checked to guarantee the quality of the audio recordings. The oral histories were audio-recorded and transcribed afterwards for thorough analysis. For the analysis of the data, a deductive code tree was developed, guided by the theoretical framework. The transcriptions were analysed using AtlasTI software, which facilitated the application of the predetermined codes to uncover themes and patterns.

To answer the question *‘What defines regional identity and which factors contribute to its formation?’* a secondary data analysis approach was used, relying on existing data gathered through desk research. Literature related to ‘regional identity’ was searched via Google Scholar. The reliability and validity of the sources have been assessed based on the publication source, and the recency of the article. Notably, much of the literature concerning the Elfstedentocht is somewhat dated. The limitations of using secondary data, such as potential biases in original data and variations in data quality are acknowledged (Hassan, 2024). This critical evaluation ensured that the secondary data provided a foundation for understanding regional identity.

The question *‘What were the personal experiences of individuals who participated in the Elfstedentocht of 1985?’* was addressed through the collection of oral histories. According to

Hay & Cope (2021), oral histories deepen the understanding of historical narratives and contribute to creating a living archive that connects generations and strengthens cultural roots. Therefore, the preservation of oral histories becomes crucial in connecting the past and present and enriching our collective narrative. The method is appropriate for this research as memories from the Elfstedentocht need to be preserved and made available to future generations.

The third question ‘*How does the Elfstedentocht of 1985 reflect or formulate the Frisian regional identity?*’ will be answered by combining the insights gained from the oral histories with the secondary literature. This analysis will examine whether the factors identified as influential in shaping regional identity are also recognised by the participants of the Elfstedentocht. By combining the oral histories with the secondary data analysis, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how historical events like the Elfstedentocht reflect regional identity.

2.2 REFLECTION ON QUALITY OF THE DATA

LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic literature on the Elfstedentocht is limited, with Lolkama (2006) & (2008) being one of the few writers on the subject. As a Frisian himself, he might be biased in his writings. Despite this, his works are among the few available sources of detailed information on the Tour. Additionally, some of the literature used in this research is relatively old, which raises concerns about its relevance and accuracy in the current context. The scarcity of up-to-date literature necessitates caution when drawing conclusions based on these sources.

ORAL HISTORIES

The participants in this study were all volunteers who skated in the musical about the Elfstedentocht, indicating a strong personal interest in ice skating. This suggests that their

experiences may be skewed towards the sporting aspect of the Elfstedentocht. If a broader range of interviewees had been selected, including those who participated primarily for cultural reasons, the findings might have presented a more balanced perspective on the motivations behind participating in this Tour. This potential bias must be considered when interpreting the results, as it may not fully represent the diversity of motivations among all Elfstedentocht participants.

The oral histories, while providing first-hand accounts, are not without their limitations. Memories can be influenced and altered over time, which may affect the accuracy of the information provided. Furthermore, most participants had skated in multiple Elfstedentochten, possibly leading to mixing up experiences from different years. Despite these challenges, oral histories remain valuable for capturing personal perspectives and preserving memories, offering insights that might not be accessible through other methods. The data is collected first-hand and thus holds a degree of reliability due to capturing authentic experiences, but these factors should be considered in the analysis.

TRUSTWORTHINESS

Throughout this research, ethical considerations were strictly adhered to, ensuring the trustworthiness of the findings. However, the relatively small number of participants limits the representativeness of the study. While each participation provides a unique narrative, capturing the full spectrum of experiences is challenging. As Cornips et al. (2010) argue, common identities, whether national or local, are inherently diverse. Each community is made up of subgroups, generalisations often fail to capture the full reality, and this makes it impossible to fully represent all individual identities. This study thus captures the diverse experiences of individuals and provides insights into the varied nature of regional identity.

2.3 ETHICS

To adhere to the ethical considerations, this research followed the Dutch Code of Conduct for Research Integrity by the NWO (2018). This code of conduct for research integrity across the Netherlands comprises five principles: honesty, scrupulousness, transparency, independence, and responsibility.

The data obtained from the oral histories was used solely for educational purposes and was handled with honesty and precision. The participants were not influenced by the researcher and were allowed to withdraw from the research at any time, adhering to the principle of responsibility. Additionally, participants had the right to anonymity, meaning their names would not be published if they did not want to. However, for oral histories it is usually common practice to include the name of the interviewee. Therefore, it was important to communicate this information to the respondents through a consent form (*Appendix A*). This form, which included the project's goals, the potential risks of participating, and the requirement that the oral history will become publicly available, was signed by the respondents.

In this research, there was a potential for a personal relationship between the researcher and participants of the oral histories, which could affect objectivity. Initially, I was concerned about the small population size and the feasibility of finding enough participants quickly, but surprisingly, there was a high level of enthusiasm, and I was able to proceed without needing to rely on my convenience sample. To ensure objectivity and treat all participants equally, I decided to interview only individuals who I had not previously known. A standardised list of topics was used, and it was reiterated that responses should be honest and reflect their true views. Although, it is important to note that the respondents were free to tell whatever they wanted to tell, ranging from their initial encounters with ice skating to their experiences during the Elfstedentocht, and reflecting on the event's significance both then and now, without me

asking specific questions. Besides, a friendly and neutral position was adopted, as this significantly influences the atmosphere and the course of the interview. After the interview was conducted and transcribed, the participants' full endorsement was obtained before making it publicly available. Until then, the audio recordings and transcripts of the interviews have been stored in a password-protected folder.

POSITIONALITY

As a 24-year-old female studying my own Frisian culture, my positionality brings both unique insights and potential biases to this research. Growing up in the Netherlands, more precisely Friesland, and having been ice skating since I was little, makes me an insider in this study. This insider status can be advantageous, as it allows me to ask relevant questions and generate richer data for deeper analysis. Besides, interviewees might feel a greater sense of trust and openness, facilitating more candid and comprehensive responses (Gajaweera & Johnson, 2015). Additionally, conducting interviews in Frisian enables participants to express themselves more comfortably and accurately.

However, studying one's own culture and region also presents challenges. My closeness to the subject may lead to assumptions and the risk of taking certain cultural features for granted. This familiarity might make it difficult to maintain complete objectivity throughout the study (Gajaweera & Johnson, 2015). While complete objectivity is impossible to achieve in any research, recognising and understanding these biases is crucial (Hoogbergen, 2021). To address this, I have involved reviewers with different backgrounds to review certain parts of the research, helping to balance my perspective and mitigate bias.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

This section will explore the experiences and perceptions of participants in the Elfstedentocht and examine how these contribute to the Frisian regional identity. By analysing the oral histories, several key themes emerged which will be presented and discussed with existing literature. The themes that will be discussed are the unfamiliarity of the Elfstedentocht in 1985 to the participants, whether they consider it a Frisian or a Dutch event, the role of the landscape in the Tour, the sense of community which prevailed throughout the interviews, the atmosphere surrounding the event and how this has changed over the years, concluded by the significance of the Elfstedentocht to the participants. The respondents will be shortly introduced.

- **Jan B.** grew up in Drenthe and developed an interest in ice skating at the age of 6 or 7. He became a member of the Elfstedenvereniging after watching the Elfstedentocht in 1963. He lived in Wyns, Friesland during the Elfstedentocht of 1985 and participated in the Tours of 1985, 1986 and 1997. In 1996, he also completed the 200km, although there was no official Elfstedentocht announced that year.
- **Pieter** was born and raised in Damwâld, Friesland. He was a dedicated skater before the Elfstedentocht of 1985, he was so determined to participate that he and his friends slept in front of the office to secure a starting permit. He skated in the Elfstedentocht of 1985, 1986 and 1997, describing these as the three most beautiful days of his life, much to his wife's displeasure.
- **Hans** grew up near Amsterdam, Noord-Holland, and joined the Elfstedenvereniging in 1996. He started skating in 1987 after a soccer career and participated in the Elfstedentocht of 1997. He was drawn to this event because of its reputation and competitive nature.
- **Hendrik Jan** was raised in a family passionate about ice skating. He lived in Beetsterzwaag, Friesland, and proudly holds the *Elfstedenbrevet*, a certificate awarded

for completing the Elfstedentocht on skates, by bike and by foot. He skated the Elfstedentocht in 1985, 1986, and 1997.

- **Jan D.** grew up in Voorburg near The Hague, Zuid-Holland, where he was introduced to ice skating at the age of five. He became a member of the Elfstedenvereniging as part of a student prank, however, he skated the Elfstedentocht in 1985, 1986 and 1997. Currently residing in Harlingen, Friesland, he considers the waters of Friesland his backyard.

UNFAMILIARITY

When I discussed my research with Pieter and mentioned that I had selected the Elfstedentocht of 1985, he remarked, ‘It was for many people something new’. This comment underscores a recurring theme of unfamiliarity with the Tour throughout the interviews. Given that the last Elfstedentocht before 1985 occurred in 1963, participants and spectators alike had little experience to set their expectations against. The uncertainty and the generational gap in direct experience with the Elfstedentocht created a unique context for the 1985 edition.

For Jan D., the Elfstedentocht of 1963, in which his father-in-law participated, left a lasting impression. His relative recalled beautiful stories from that day that coloured Jan D.’s perception of the event. It was the Tour of 1963 that also defined the public’s expectations of what an Elfstedentocht entailed, though it was marked by particularly severe conditions, bad ice and harsh weather. Jan D. stated, ‘You can often have bad weather or difficult ice. I mean, it’s great that those people bravely ploughed through, but that is not typical for an Elfstedentocht. That is characteristic of ’63, but there have been very beautiful Elfstedentochten in the 1940s and 1950s with beautiful ice. It was a challenging distance, but you could just enjoy skating’.

Despite these narratives that shaped the Elfstedentocht's image, there remained a significant degree of unfamiliarity. Pieter was initially unsure about appropriate clothing and considered starting with a backpack, only to learn that it would not be possible to pass under the bridges with it. Hendrik Jan expressed his anxiety about the 200-kilometer distance, admitting 'Gosh, 200 kilometres, no idea, so [I took it] easy'. Hans, who caught glimpses of the Elfstedentocht of 1985 on television while at work, noted that the event was widely viewed across the Netherlands. It was the media who provided the image of what the event encompassed and filled this gap of unfamiliarity. Also, this led to a shared national experience as mentioned by Koolhaas (2010).

Jan B. also mentioned that he was interviewed by journalists from Belgium, the NOS, and Dutch newspapers posted photos of him in their papers. 'As soon as it starts freezing, calls come in from Holland asking, 'when will it be organized?''', as mentioned by Pieter. This widespread media attention and coverage, as Scholten (2022) notes, facilitated a shared national experience that likely enhanced a collective sense of pride and identity. Besides, the uncertainty of it happening again, as mentioned by Pieter, leads to people being eager to participate whether they are injured or not. They wanted to be part of this shared history.

The widespread interest in the Elfstedentocht extended far beyond the province of Friesland, as illustrated by Jan D.'s experience. While residing near Amsterdam at the time, Jan D. sought to register for the Tour and found himself at the Central Station waiting for hours amidst a massive queue of individuals who also wanted to participate. This enthusiasm was thus not limited to Frisians like Pieter, who camped outside the office to secure a starting permit. Similar dedication was evident in Amsterdam, indicating the broad appeal and excitement the Elfstedentocht generated across the country.

FRISIAN OR DUTCH?

Pieter and Jan B. contend that the Elfstedentocht is essentially a Frisian event. To Jan B., it is the Frisian language, particularly the expressions, that reinforce its regional identity. He highlights, 'It [the Elfstedentocht] starts with the announcement of *'it sil heve'* or *'it giet oan'* (It is going to happen), 'That is part of it, and it will remain a part of it'. These Frisian expressions are well-known across the country and are particularly linked to the Elfstedentocht. Jan B. points out that recently considerable attention has been paid to the Frisian language, its unique characteristics, and the concept of community or *mienskip*.

While Pieter initially views it as a Frisian event, he acknowledges that its appeal extends beyond Friesland, stating 'Everyone in the Netherlands is captivated. The Elfstedentocht really stirs things up and might thus also be considered a national event'. Yet, he continues that other provinces do not have such a route, emphasising the unique geographical and cultural elements of Friesland. 'A bit of everything, *Gaasterland* (area in the south of Friesland), through the *Luts* (river in the south of Friesland), through the trees, the lakes; no other province has that. The landscape, and a 200-kilometre route like this connecting all the towns'.

Hans, who is not Frisian, conversely, views it as a fundamentally Dutch phenomenon. When looking at the long-track competitions, he argues, it is not only the Frisians who participate in the races, people come from all over the country. Yet, it is observable that most ice skating clubs are concentrated in the north of the country, where water bodies historically offered the quickest routes across distances. Jan D. deepens this narrative, explaining the Dutch affinity for ice skating. He argues that people in the Netherlands are raised with water. In the Netherlands, and particularly in Friesland, there is a cultural upbringing centred around mastering water, starting from teaching children to swim and skate at a young age. He describes this as a foundational layer of Dutch culture, particularly evident in winter as this is the only time when

humans can more effectively control water. This is in line with Andere Tijden (2016) who stated that the Dutch have a unique relationship with the water, with the ice occupying a special position.

Additionally, when the ice was present, people from different villages could reach each other. Thus, the water acts as a unifying element, and its mastery is ingrained in the DNA of the Dutch. The Elfstedentocht is not just a sporting event. ‘It is also a part of culture and deeply ingrained. It is a part of Dutch history’, according to Hans. This is in line with Andere Tijden (2016), who states that ice amusement throughout the centuries remained an integral part of the Dutch national culture. Jan D. emphasizes that the Elfstedentocht is ‘the ice skating tour of the Frisians’, similar to how each Dutch province has its own distinct tour. However, he points out that the media has sensationalised this event since 1963, making it suddenly significant for many people.

THE ROLE OF LANDSCAPE

For several interviewees, the physical landscape of Friesland played a critical role in shaping their experiences during the Elfstedentocht. Jan B. was especially impressed by the diversity of the Frisian landscape. He vividly remembers entering the *Slotermeer* (Lake near Sloten), noting:

‘It is beautiful because you skate towards Sloten. And then... the sun rises. The first part is in the dark. Yes, that is such a beautiful experience. It’s true. And especially at the Slotermeer, with the expansiveness of the Frisian landscape, it is magnificent’.

This reflection underscores the powerful aesthetic and emotional impact of the environment. Similarly, as we have seen before, Pieter highlights the unique diversity of the Frisian landscaping, indicating its significant role in the character of the event.

Conversely, Hans was so immersed in the act of skating that he scarcely noticed the surrounding landscape. However, subtly woven into the narratives, Jan D., also recognises the landscape's charm, noting his preference for skating some parts alone due to the breath-taking scenery, which he describes as 'fantastic'. This illustrates that for some participants, the landscape is not just a backdrop but a vivid part of their memories of that day. This aligns with Renes (2014), who suggests that memories of an event often include a visual representation of the location. Moreover, the differing perceptions highlight the individualised interactions and responses to the same landscape. While for some, the landscape evokes strong emotional responses, for others, it may hold less significance. Such diversity in responses to the physical setting reveals that while the landscape can significantly enhance the experience for some, it remains a small detail for others. Landscapes are indeed intrinsically personal, as Howard (2011) notes.

An interesting aspect of this subjective experience is illustrated by Jan D's reflections on skating the Elfstedentocht. In 1985, he described feeling completely isolated in an unfamiliar landscape. However, when he participated again in 1997, after having lived in Friesland for several years and becoming familiar with the local waters and the community, his experience was different. It felt as if he was skating in his backyard. This transformation underscores Kunst's (2015) statement that personal and collective histories significantly shape how individuals perceive and value landscapes. Everyday experiences shape individuals' attitudes towards a region, and a region can become a focal point of community and belonging (Pohl, 2001). This is what can be observed in the case of Jan D, as the meanings we attach to these landscapes are inseparable from our personal and collective narratives, influencing our experiences and interactions within these environments.

SENSE OF COMMUNITY OR 'MIENSKIP'

Another recurring theme is the sense of community or 'mienskip' experienced by the interviewees. It all starts with preparing the ice, as Jan B. noted. When an Elfstedentocht is announced, everyone drops what they are holding and ensures that the ice is in good condition. He mentioned that he was working in Friesland at the time and the chairman of a meeting called up and said, 'An Elfstedentocht is coming, therefore the meeting cannot proceed, as we must work on the ice to make sure the track is good'. Remarkable, all those who help are volunteers, who act out of a communal spirit deeply embedded in the Frisian character. This illustrates the event's capability to bring parts of societal life to a complete halt, as described by Lolkama (2008). Suddenly, nothing is more important than the Elfstedentocht.

Mienskip, the act of helping each other, is also very strongly experienced by Jan B, who even claims that you do not find it anywhere else like this. Pieter shared this sentiment, noting that the solidarity on the ice was immense. Additionally, Hendrik-Jan specifically highlighted the helpfulness of people along the route. He describes them as being extremely enthusiastic and doing everything they could for the skaters. People stood in the middle of the fields offering peeled oranges and cookies. In Kimsward, where the ice was in bad condition and skaters had to *kluun* (walk with skates on the land), locals even laid out pieces of carpet from their homes to protect the skaters' blades. It is the cultural heritage, as described by Engelshoven (2018), that is experienced collectively and therefore able to bind communities.

A story Jan B. shared, resonated with me and encompasses this feeling of *mienskip*. Jan B. mentioned that he was injured before participating in the Elfstedentocht, but his desire to participate was so strong that he started the race regardless. His wife was worried and wanted to know how he was doing, but since there were no mobile phones at the time, he prepared several cards with their home phone number on them. In various cities, he gave these cards to

strangers, asking them to call his wife and inform her that Jan B. had passed through. As a result, his wife received calls out of several cities, keeping her informed about her husband's arrival and the condition he was in. This act of entrusting important messages to strangers and their willingness to carry out these requests demonstrates a high level of mutual trust and cooperation, which are the cornerstones of *mienskip*. Jan B. asserted that without the support of fellow skaters and the people along the route who went out of their way to assist, he would not have made it and would have quit. 'You pull each other through', he said.

ATMOSPHERE

Lastly, it is the atmosphere of the day that the interviewees richly recall, though Pieter finds this atmosphere difficult to define precisely. On the ice, you quickly make friends, he argues, as you become so close and feel connected. But also, the crowd, you feel uplifted by the people cheering along the route. Jan D., Pieter, Hendrik-Jan, and Jan B. specifically remember the atmosphere in the city of Franeker. Hendrik-Jan describes this as extremely moving, 'there was a crowd, and the encouragement was unbelievable. It felt like scoring the winning goal in the Olympic Stadium'. Jan D. entered Franeker alone, where thousands of people lined the sides,

as can be seen in *Figure 2*. For him, this was overwhelmingly emotional, being cheered on so energetically after such a tough segment of skating. 'It was so moving', he said, 'I bawled out'. While he recalls this memory, the interview fell silent for a while, and Jan D. mentions that he is still touched even by



Figure 2: Franeker 1985 (NOS, 2020)

the memory of that moment. 'The way you were received so enthusiastically and personally, it gave me so much energy', he mentioned. Jan B. had a similar experience 'I became very

emotional. Now that I am telling it, I can see it all over again. I became very emotional. And then I thought, I cannot stop now, can I?'. Pieter shares that in Franeker, even the police were dancing on the ice, contributing to the vibrant atmosphere. He even re-entered the city just to experience such an enthusiastic welcome again.

Hendrik-Jan tells a similar story about the city of Dokkum. While skating towards Dokkum, he encountered people headed to Leeuwarden, striking up a conversation with a stranger. 'Dokkum is beautiful', the stranger remarked and began to share his experiences, claiming they were even more impressive than those of Franeker. 'You skate through the city canals with stands all around. That is the point where the route turns back. People were ecstatic. It was thrilling, really thrilling', he explained and then declared he would accompany him back to Dokkum to experience this again. Not only in the cities the participants were encouraged. Jan D. also describes a solitary moment skating through the fields when he suddenly hears someone shout, 'Hey red hat, keep it up!'. Realising this encouragement was for him, he felt a surge of energy. This collective enthusiasm and personal encouragement exemplify the deeply communal and supportive spirit of the Elfstedentocht, embedding it as more than a physical challenge.

COMMERCIALISATION & CHANGING ATMOSPHERE

However, Hendrik-Jan noted a shift in the atmosphere of subsequent Elfstedentochten. While the 1985 event was a genuine folk festival, 'truly ours' as he stated, by 1997, it had become commercialised, altering the atmosphere significantly. Where in 1985, tea was offered for free, by 1997, it cost a guilder, he recalled. Jan D. observed a similar trend. The way people interact has increasingly moved away from that original sense of community, marking a change in the cultural fabric surrounding the event. Jan B. also pointed out a change in the atmosphere among participants during the 1997 edition.

To him, the values of helping and supporting each other were essential. He recalled a specific moment when these values were absent. He explained:

‘I have always experienced that someone who is still fresh, would take the lead to block the wind. In 1997, that was no longer the case. From Franeker to Dokkum, we were facing headwinds, and I had been leading for a considerable distance with a group of 7 or 8 skaters behind me. At one point, I moved aside to let someone else take over, but no one did. Eventually, I was completely exhausted’.

This change in the communal spirit from a deeply connected *mienskip* to a more commercialised and individualistic atmosphere could be framed within the broader discussion of how modernisation and commercial interests impact traditional cultural practices.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ELFSTEDENTOCHT

A story told by Jan D. illustrates the significance of the Elfstedentocht. Jan D. had to defend his thesis at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. When he was standing there fidgeting as he was so nervous, his supervisor, who was Frisian, said, ‘You must talk, you must tell us about how the Elfstedentocht was, you should not talk about your thesis’. So, Jan D. spoke in detail about the day of the Elfstedentocht, and only spent 20 minutes to half an hour discussing his thesis. This anecdote highlights how deeply the Elfstedentocht resonates within Dutch culture, transcending even academic settings.

It is also the *Elfstedenkruisje*, as can be seen in *Figure 3*, smaller than a quarter and weighing less than seven grams, the reward of this sports achievement, that carries the memory of an unforgettable Elfstedentocht day. When completing the Tour, participants receive this



Figure 3: *Elfstedenkruisje* (Leeuwarder Courant, 2012)

Elfstedenkruisje, as a form of a medal. Pieter mentions that he has three children, and skated three Elfstedentochten, therefore each one of them will inherit an *Elfstedenkruisje*, as they hold a special value to him. This underscores the event's deep emotional resonance and the values of perseverance he wishes to impart to future generations. Similarly, Jan B. attributes personal value to this medal. Years later, when he and his colleagues were to receive a royal honour, he expressed to his boss that he had no desire for it, stating 'I value the *Elfstedenkruisje* much more'. Jan B. argues that this sentiment is also shared by Dutch King Willem-Alexander, who completed the Tour in 1985 and proudly wears his *Elfstedenkruisje* alongside other formal decorations at official events. However, despite the medal being an official distinction, to Jan D., it is the stories in his head and the experiences gained that have true value, and his *Elfstedenkruisje* just lies in a drawer. This resonates with Betten (2013), who states that everyone has their own version of the Tour, and the collection of associations and feelings with the Tour are very personal.

Besides an *Elfstedenkruisje*, the photographs of those who completed the Elfstedentocht in 1985 were displayed on the '*Tegeltjesbrug*' (bridge) in Oudkerk. Initially, Hendrik-Jan was unsure about this project, feeling it was somewhat self-congratulatory to participate in the project. Yet, persuaded by his wife's suggestion that it was a legacy for their children and grandchildren, his view shifted. Now, whenever the conditions allow for ice skating, he visits the bridge with his family, proudly pointing out his photo and saying 'Look, that is granddad! This bridge has thus become a link to his personal and shared heritage, through which stories will be passed down and celebrated across generations, contributing to a shared cultural identity.

However, there are concerns that this heritage may be fading, and this is also feared by some participants. Jan B. observed that the youth is unfamiliar with skating heroes of their time; while in earlier generations it was common practice to discuss them with peers. He also points out that his grandchildren are unfamiliar with the term *klunen* (walking with skates on the land),

while this word is second nature to him. Similarly, Hans observed a decline in participation in ice clubs and expressed concern that this aspect of Dutch culture is gradually diminishing. He suggests that revitalising interest could centre on the Elfstedentocht occurring again, ‘So everyone can see how grand the spectacle is. It has been too long’. This is in line with UNESCO (n.d.) which argues that the cultural identity of nations might disappear due to the climate crisis, something we thus see happening in the Netherlands. Losing this heritage might lead to a loss of identity and continuity. Furthermore, Pieter reflects on the potential impact of another Elfstedentocht, speculating that the younger generation would be astonished by the event, much like in 1985. This underscores the importance of maintaining such cultural events as vital elements of national heritage.

In addition, it can be observed in the stories of these participants that it is not only the cultural element that attracts people to participate. Jan B., Hendrik-Jan, and Jan D. all skated the route on just a random day, without the event being officially organised and people standing along the coast. This shows that it is not only the cultural aspect but also the practice of ice skating which is embraced by the Dutch.

CONCLUSION

MAIN FINDINGS

This concluding chapter will answer the central question of this thesis, ‘What is the significance of 1985s Elfstedentocht for the Frisian regional identity?’. This will be addressed in two sections. Firstly, through a concise summary of the sub-questions, and secondly by concluding the research.

First, when looking at what regional identity encompasses and how it is constructed, it can be stated that regional identity is a multifaceted concept that represents how individuals and communities perceive and connect with a specific geographic space. It is shaped by a combination of tangible and intangible elements that include historical narratives, language, heritage, and the landscape. The physical landscape provides the background for the daily lives of the inhabitants and influences regional activities and traditions. Cultural practices like the traditional sports in Friesland, also significantly shape regional identity by promoting the shared heritage and values. The construction of regional identity is a dynamic process, influenced not only by the inherited and long-standing characteristics of the region but also by the ongoing interactions and changes within the community. Regional identity serves as a fundamental aspect of how residents relate to their environment and each other, fostering a sense of belonging and uniqueness that distinguishes one region from another.

The Frisian identity is rooted in historical and cultural heritage that distinguishes this region within the Netherlands. It is the language combined with the landscape and a strong community spirit or *mienskip*, that plays a big role in the Frisian identity. The landscape not only shapes the daily life of the region but also reinforces a sense of place and belonging among its people, as the landscape is regarded as an important element in the Frisian identity by the Frisians themselves. However, understanding the Frisian identity requires acknowledging its

complexity, recognising that it is both formed throughout history and that it is responsive to contemporary influences. Identity is thus not static, and its formation is a social process. This dynamic interplay ensures that the Frisian identity is continually redefined through social interactions.

Secondly, it was investigated whether the experiences of participants of the Elfstedentocht of 1985 reflected or reinforced this Frisian regional identity. The differing responses to the event underscore its subjective significance to each participant. For some, it was the best and most memorable day of their life, whereas others perceived the event as just another ice skating tour. These variations in perceptions show the deeply personal nature of experiences and how individuals ascribe meaning to the same event.

Whereas the practice of ice skating has historical roots in the region due to its geographical and climatic conditions, it became clear that it is not only a crucial part of the Frisian heritage, but also of the broader Dutch culture. However, using phrases like 'it sil heve' or 'it giet oan' to announce an Elfstedentocht, emphasises that the Frisian language is connected to this event, highlighting the pride and the Frisian identity that is incorporated and embraced in this event. Also, words like *klunen*, which are originally Frisian, were incorporated into the Dutch vocabulary. Besides, it is also the strong sense of community which is illustrated through the participant's stories.

The community comes together to prepare for the event, make sure the ice is in good condition, and people along the route massively support the skaters. Such acts of community solidarity and support, are fundamental aspects of the Frisian, showcasing a deeply ingrained social cohesion. Moreover, the role of the landscape in this event is also frequently mentioned. For some, the landscape became an integral part of the experience, whereas others were too focused on the practice of ice skating and did not pay attention to it. Landscapes are thus deeply personal

and experienced differently by individuals. However, other symbols that symbolise the Frisian identity like the Frisian flag, or the Frisian anthem, are not mentioned by the participants. Besides, whereas some argued that it is a distinct Frisian event, it can also be said that its appeal stretches beyond the regional borders to a national event. Every individual can identify with the event on a different scale (Koolhaas, 2010).

In conclusion, it can be stated that, according to the narratives of the interviewees, the Elfstedentocht reflects certain values of the Frisian identity. With the sense of community being the most experienced and recognised by the participants. In Friesland, the ice and a sense of community are connected, with the Elfstedentocht being representative of this. Furthermore, it is the landscape and the Frisian language which shape the cultural aspect of the Tour.

Moreover, the Elfstedentocht is used as cultural heritage to shape and promote the Frisian regional identity. It is a moment that Friesland receives national and international attention, which is ideal for showing its culture to the rest of the world. This was particularly evident in 1985, as the Elfstedentocht was broadcast live on national television and covered by international journalists, significantly boosting Friesland and the Netherlands. Although the Elfstedentocht has become part of the Dutch intangible heritage, its Frisian roots and character are still emphasized in the event. So, on the one hand, the Elfstedentocht reflects the values of the Frisian regional identity, whereas, on the other hand, it is a moment where this identity is celebrated and highlighted on a regional, national, and even international stage.

LIMITATIONS

In this research several methodological limitations arise, shaping the narrative and the potential insights derived from this. Firstly, the selection of interviewees might introduce a selection bias, as participants with a positive experience or a special story might be more inclined to share their experiences than those with more neutral or bad experiences. This issue is intensified by

the small sample size of five interviews, which limits the diversity of views and risks not being able to fully portray the sentiment of the broader community. However, this research aims to provide insights into individual experiences and not to draw generalised conclusions.

Moreover, the research only includes male participants and is therefore missing the insights women offer, who might perceive the event differently. Besides, memory reliability further complicates the authenticity and accuracy of the participant's stories as already mentioned in the methodology section. Memories can be altered over time, influenced by public discourse or the media. Such influences can lead to a skewed representation of the event's impact, making it challenging to distinguish the actual sentiments from the reconstructed memories. Lastly, the translation of the interviews from Frisian or Dutch to English might risk nuances in language and expressions being lost in translation. Therefore, the true sentiments of the respondents might not come across to the reader the way the respondent intended it.

These limitations show the difficulties in using oral histories as a research method. Besides it being a great way to capture personal narratives, it is important to recognise these challenges while interpreting the results and understanding the conclusions drawn from them. It needs to be remembered that those oral histories only capture a small portion of a wider range of experiences and views.

FUTURE RESEARCH

It is recommended to carry out future research on the perspectives of the youth on the significance of the Elfstedentocht for Frisian regional identity. This study has limited itself to participants of the Tour, however, it would be a great addition to research this group as they have not experienced the event themselves. It would be interesting to see whether the event holds value for them and their identity. Furthermore, it would be valuable to compare the views of Frisians with those from other parts of the Netherlands. Due to the limited scope of this study,

it was challenging to draw general conclusions on this part. Therefore, conducting broader research that compares how those groups view the event will provide insights into the regional and national significance of this event.

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FIGURES

Figure 1

Metronieuws (2020). *Dag van de Elfstedentocht voor als-ie nooit weer komt*. Retrieved on 01-06-2024 from <https://www.metronieuws.nl/in-het-nieuws/sport/2020/01/dag-van-de-elfstedentocht-voor-als-ie-nooit-meer-komt/>

Figure 2

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Figure 3

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CF Ethics Committee Template 2024

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title study: Elfstedentocht and Frisian regional identity

Name participant:

Assessment

- I have read the information sheet and was able to ask any additional question to the researcher.
- I understand I may ask questions about the study at any time.
- I understand I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason.
- I understand that at any time I can refuse to answer any question without any consequences.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.

Confidentiality and Data Use

- I understand that my name, age and gender will be used in the publication.
- I understand that my story will be archived and can be viewed by those interested.
- I understand that the information provided will be used only for this research and publications directly related to this research project.
- I understand that data (consent forms, recordings, interview transcripts) will be retained on the Y-drive of the University of Groningen server for 5 years, in correspondence with the university GDPR legislation.

Future involvement

- I wish to receive a copy of the scientific output of the project.
- I consent to be re-contacted for participating in future studies.

Having read and understood all the above, I agree to participate in the research study: yes / no

Date

Signature

To be filled in by the researcher

- I declare that I have thoroughly informed the research participant about the research study and answered any remaining questions to the best of my knowledge.
- I agree that this person participates in the research study.

Date

Signature