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**RESEARCH**

# Analyzing Cultural Markers to Characterize Regional Identity for Rural Planning

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Regional identity is the shared sense of regional ‘one-ness’, distinctiveness and difference. However, it is an undervalued factor to promote development in lagging rural areas and little is known about methods to reveal its content. This paper aims to develop and apply a method to explore regional identity in rural areas. We argue that the most important cultural markers – understood as rural landscapes and heritage features, perceived as regional identity reference points – can be analyzed and used to characterize regional identity. To this end, a case study was undertaken in two rural areas in northern Germany. We conducted 55 semi-structured interviews and determined cultural markers, using a new procedure with different analysis stages (identification, collectivity, historical depth, relationships). Results revealed a broad spectrum of cultural markers exhibiting collective significance with respect to landscape, built structures, history, intangible heritage and land-use. Next to traditional cultural markers, we found modern ones, introduced after the Second World War. Partially, traditional and modern cultural markers were perceived as related. Based on this knowledge, a first characterization of both regional identities was conducted, showing differences between our study areas. While one regional identity appears to be fragmented, conflicting and influenced by modern cultural markers, the other was characterized as coherent and rooted in traditional cultural markers. However, the integration of these characterizations into further planning steps remains challenging and needs additional, regionally adapted methods. A key finding of the study is that there is no single standard method for linking regional identity and rural planning.

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**Keywords:** Regional identity; Landscapes; Heritage; Rural planning

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## Introduction

In previous decades, many rural regions experienced a complex transformation. Blurring rural-urban boundaries and changing consumer demands caused the emergence of new actors, functions and practices (Horlings, 2010; Mitchell, 2013). At the same time, demographic changes and a decrease of agricultural economic significance took place (Bryden and Hart, 2004; Johansson, 2015). Against this backdrop, various academic concepts were developed to prevent decline and improve rural economies, ranging from ‘neo-endogenous development’ to ‘place branding’ (CCRC, 2007; Domínguez García et al., 2013; OECD, 2006; Ray, 1998). Commonalities among these strategies include the facilitation of cross-sectoral and multi-level cooperation, the use of regional core assets as well as a place-based approach for development. In addition to knowledge advancements in this field, political adjustments were made to strengthen regional competitiveness (e.g. by providing funds like EFRE, ESF,

Cohesion Funds, LEADER). This direction of policy and academic advancements was effective and in many regions, bottom-up initiatives caused successful developments (e.g. Cawley and Gillmor, 2008; San Eugenio-Vela and Barniol-Carcasona, 2015). Nevertheless, stagnant regions remain. Assessments on the European Union level periodically highlight the prevalence of regions that lag behind in terms of important socioeconomic and structural indicators (Copus, 2015; Scholz and Herrmann, 2010). Bottom-up approaches seem to have failed there due to difficulties in stakeholder motivation, differing agendas and a lack of trust in using local resources as development potentials (af Rosenschöld and Löyhkö, 2016; Kneafsey, 2001; van Ostaaijen, Horlings and van der Stoep, 2010).

We argue that a crucial reason for the missing cooperation within struggling rural areas is that planning undervalues the power of regional identity for collective action. In a broad sense, regional identity can be understood as personal and collective positive feelings towards a region, ranging from a vague sense of belonging to close attachments and deliberate confession (Pohl, 2001). Literature gives evidence that deploying regional identity can foster development approaches. A strong regional identity is seen to increase

public participation, because identity holders with strong attachments show a greater willingness to take part in planning if opportunities exist (Carrus et al., 2014; Messely, Dessein and Lauwers, 2010; Raagmaa, 2002; Smith et al., 2011; Soini, Vaarala and Pouta, 2012). Furthermore, the constituents of regional identity can be used to initiate dialogue (Davenport and Anderson, 2005) and serve as a vision to guide stakeholders of a regional community into one direction (Ray, 2001).

Consequently, planning should investigate regional identities more extensively and utilize them systematically to promote development. In this context, systematic means to either use existing regional identities for planning or to act upon its remnants and redefine them. The latter may be necessary because regional identities also appear weak (Simon, Huigen and Groote, 2010) and inconsistent, which means that different and/or conflicting ideas of identity exist (Kneafsey, Ilbery and Jenkins, 2001; Mettepenningen et al., 2011). Thus, the question emerges, how can planners efficiently capture the identity of a region?

Until now, research has not sufficiently linked planning with place or regional identity (Manzo, 2006). Despite some attempts to theorize and discover place meanings for planning (Lokocz, Ryan and Sadler, 2011; Sedlacek, Kurka and Maier, 2009), it seems that little is known about appropriate methods to bring spatial planning and regional identity together. Where regional identity is already used in the planning practice, the term is filled with different content and often remains vaguely defined (Paasi, 2013). To fill this gap in planning-related research, the objective of this paper is to develop and apply a method to shed light on regional identities in rural areas.

The following section gives an overview of the complex regional identity concept, to lay a theoretical foundation. Based on that, the study aim is specified and a new method to determine reference points of regional identity based on cultural markers is devised. To this end, we conceptualized cultural markers as features of rural landscapes and heritage, which are perceived as identity-forming. That is followed by the results of two case studies in rural areas within the Hamburg Metropolitan Region (Germany). Results were discussed with a particular focus on methodological issues and the usability of cultural markers for rural planning.

## Theory

### *What is regional identity? Unfolding a complex concept for purposes of rural planning*

A regional identity is a form of place identity on the regional level. Place-related research is grounded in the idea that human relationships to environmental settings are not limited to functional bonds. Additionally, territories become significant to people, e.g. due to memories related to them or symbolic meanings which are given to and derived from them (Horton and Kraftl, 2014; Lewicka, 2011). In contrast to abstract spaces without any personal value, territories imbued with such meanings are called places (Horton and Kraftl, 2014). People construct them and relate to them in different ways (Low and Altman,

1992). However, examining available scientific concepts of human-place relationships is confusing due to the definition diversity emerging from various academic disciplines: Scholars coined terms like place attachment, place identity, people-in-place relationships or sense of place (Hernandez, Hidalgo and Ruiz, 2014). They were conceptualized as related to each other in various ways, partially overlapping (Pretty, Chipuer and Bramston, 2003). Recent papers discussed ways to structure and integrate different conceptualizations in a framework, differentiating between a people, a place and a person-dimension as key variables (Scannell and Gifford, 2010). Term diversity also prevails on the regional level. Some of these diverse expressions are regional identity and regional consciousness (Paasi, 2002), sense of regional belonging (Fritz-Vietta, La Vega-Leinert and Stoll-Kleemann, 2015) or subjective and objective territorial identity (Oliveira, Roca and Leitão, 2010). Related concepts are urban-related identities (Lalli, 1992) or the German notion of 'Heimat' (Ratter and Gee, 2012).

Based on the observed term diversity, it is necessary to ground the research into precise definitions that are convenient to rural planning requirements. Instead of an idiosyncratic conceptualization and the creation of yet another term, we follow the suggestion of Scannell and Gifford (2010) and use their person-process-place framework as a starting point to situate a topic-specific definition of regional identity. According to them, human-place bonds occur on the personal and the group level, and they can be grounded in individually or collectively held meanings. These aspects are related to the person-dimension. If regional identity is intended to influence collective action in rural planning and development, it must exhibit inter-subjective validity and refer to collectively held meanings. This calls for a conceptualization as a form of collective identity. Snow and Corrigan-Brown (2015) describe collective identity to be 'a shared sense of "one-ness" or "we-ness" anchored in real or imagined shared attributes and experiences among those who comprise the collectivity and in relation or contrast to one or more actual or imagined sets of "others"'. Following this line of thought, a collective regional identity can be conceived as a shared sense of regional 'one-ness' anchored in interpretations about the real or imagined regional distinctiveness and difference among regional inhabitants and stakeholders. Such a shared sense is a social construct (Simon, Huigen and Groote, 2010) which is produced and reproduced in place-related negotiation processes (Christmann, 2010). However, this conceptualization does not mean that the individual level is meaningless. According to Christmann (2010), personal place identities are derived from collective ones. Thus, we assume a relationship between collective and personal place identities on the regional level. Due to its size, a region is too large for direct experience and therefore personal regional identification is determined mainly by existing interpretations with their symbolic meanings (c.f. Tuan, 1975; Zimmerbauer, 2011).

These considerations lead to three aspects with relevance for the aimed method development. First,

although the degree of individual identification can vary depending on personal variables like place of birth, length of residency, education etc. (Lalli, 1992; Rollero and Piccoli, 2010), it is likely that inhabitants and stakeholders of a region hold at least slices of its collective regional identity. Therefore, data gathering can focus on the subjective regional identification of identity holders to shed light on the shared sense of regional 'one-ness'. Second, as a social construct, the content of a regional identity is linked to the question of power (Hague, 2005). Institutionalized stakeholders (politicians, administrators, cultural activists or entrepreneurs) can dominate or even dictate the negotiation, whereas the identity of the ordinary people might be different (Paasi, 2013). For regional identity investigations, both groups should be integrated. Finally, as results of negotiation, collective regional identities are considered to be contested and in ongoing reproduction instead of a 'permanent truth' (Paasi, 2013). This dynamic character limits the ability for planners to thoroughly understand and describe a collective regional identity at a given time. The practical application in rural planning requires a reduction of complexity.

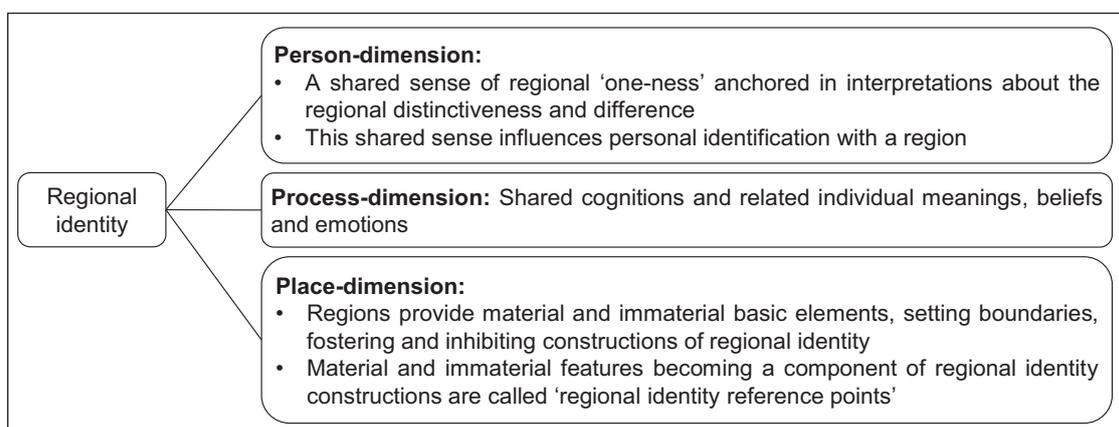
Scannell and Gifford's (2010) process-dimension deals with 'the way that individuals and groups relate to a place and the nature of the psychological interactions'. They differentiated between cognition, affect and behavior. Understanding collective regional identity as presented above implies the importance of cognitions related to regional distinctiveness and difference. The spectrum of cognitions encompasses knowledge, beliefs, symbolic meanings or memories. People form them in culturally influenced processes including the identification of environmental features, their classification and evaluation (Graumann, 1983). However, such cognitions do not automatically result in individual identification with a region. Collective regional identities can only generate action, when people 'believe in them' (Paasi, 2002) and subjectively relate to them (Lalli, 1992). On the individual level, shared place-related cognitions are internalized and combined with other beliefs and meanings, e.g. ideas of personal belonging (Christmann, 2010) or a sense of home (Cuba and Hummon, 1993). Similar to social class,

ethnicity or gender, a region can become an integral part of the self-identity (Hauge, 2007) and can be linked to emotions like happiness, love or pride (Scannell and Gifford, 2010). If individuals are the starting point in data gathering (as proposed), their internalized cognitions related to regional distinctiveness and difference as well as associated beliefs, meanings and emotions should be considered in the method design.

The place-dimension relates to characteristics of the place itself like its geographical scale (Scannell and Gifford, 2010). In these regards, we refer to the regional level. According to Paasi (2009), regions are sub-state spatial units, which are accepted parts of the territorial system and social consciousness, often but not necessarily forming an administrative entity. Furthermore, the place-dimension addresses the role of the physical environment (Scannell and Gifford, 2010). Although regional identity is conceptualized as a social construct, it is not entirely independent of the physical environment. We follow Stedman (2003), who argues that the physical environment sets boundaries, fosters or inhibits place meanings and related attachments (without saying that it is deterministic). In this sense, we see regions as providing basic physical elements, framing place-related cognitions and thus influencing social constructions of collective regional identity. However, for our analysis, we expand Scannell and Gifford's (2010) framework not only to include the physical environment. We also incorporate characteristics of the inhabitants and attributes of history and culture as components influencing regional identity (Amundsen, 2000). Material and immaterial attributes becoming part of regional identity can be called regional identity reference points (Christmann, 2010). Focusing on the most important reference points provides an approach to analyze regional identity. Furthermore, this procedure is a possibility to achieve the complexity reduction mentioned above. Our understanding of regional identity is summarized in **Figure 1**.

#### **Cultural markers as regional identity reference points**

Recently, scholars paid much attention to landscape and heritage as meaningful places (Arts et al., 2017; Hunziker, Buchecker and Hartig, 2007) and as constituents of



**Figure 1:** Summarized understanding of regional identity.

individual and collective place identity on different spatial layers. The latter can be exemplified by both conceptual models (e.g. Stobbelaar and Pedroli, 2011) and case studies (e.g. Bessiere, 1998; Fritz-Vietta, La Vega-Leinert and Stoll-Kleemann, 2015; Oreszczyń and Lane, 2000).

Physical landscapes and heritage are conceived on the one hand as merely material structures (Ipsen, 2011), resulting from a complex interplay of different socio-economic, cultural, natural and structural drivers over time (Pinto-Correia and Kristensen, 2013). On the other hand, they are seen to be inner realities in the minds of people and/or social realities produced by experience and culturally influenced meaning-giving processes (Ipsen, 2011; Jacobs, 2006). These processes allow material structures appear to be regional identity reference points. The duality of landscapes as spatial structures and as regional identity reference points leads to the question of their interplay. Corresponding to our theoretical framework in the previous section, we argue that physical landscapes and heritage are formative (but not deterministic) for regional identity constructions. This is in line with research from the field of landscape identity. On a conceptual level, Loupa Ramos et al. (2016) developed a transactional model of landscape identity. They present collective and personal landscape identity not as completely unfixed social constructs. Instead, landscape identity results from complex interdependencies between physical landscapes, landscape-related action and their evaluative perceptions over time. The framing role of physical landscapes is further supported by case studies, who found a (partially time-delayed) change of landscape identity after landscape changes (Dossche, Rogge and van Eetvelde, 2016; Llewellyn et al., 2017). Besides physical structures, additional landscape and heritage elements (including immaterial ones) can become regional identity reference point. These elements include historic events, culinary, language, crafts, folklore, visual arts, drama and literary references (Ray, 1998; Stephenson, 2008). We adopt Ray's (1998) term cultural marker for material and immaterial constituents of landscapes and heritage, which are perceived as regional identity reference points.

However, cultural markers are in danger of disappearing due to modernization (Ray, 2001). Specifically, after the Second World War, many rapid changes took place which superimposed new landscapes and induced breaks with traditions of the past, e.g. by agricultural advancements or higher administrative-level influence (Antrop, 2005; Ipsen, 2011). The impact of transformation is site-specific, and there are strongly transformed landscapes as well as those in which historical attributes show a remarkable resilience (Renes, 2015). Studies further indicate different effects of spatial transformations on regional identity, ranging from identity loss to positively valued, new constructions (van Eetvelde, Loupa Ramos and Bernardo, 2016). It has to be studied if the place-specific interplay of historically rooted features with recent changes affects the perception of cultural markers and if newly introduced features are perceived to be alienating or even constitute modern cultural markers.

### **Specified study aim**

We argue that traditional and modern components of landscape and heritage are perceived as cultural markers. Knowing the most important cultural markers is a first step to shed light on regional identities in rural areas. Due to the strong connection of personal and collective regional identity, cultural markers can be analyzed on the individual level. Widely shared cultural markers are seen as having a collective significance. Hence, the specified study aim is (a) to detect cultural markers on the personal level and identify those with collective significance, (b) to analyze the occurrence of modern and traditional cultural markers and (c) to discuss the usability of cultural marker in-depth knowledge to characterize regional identities and to utilize them in rural planning.

## **Methods**

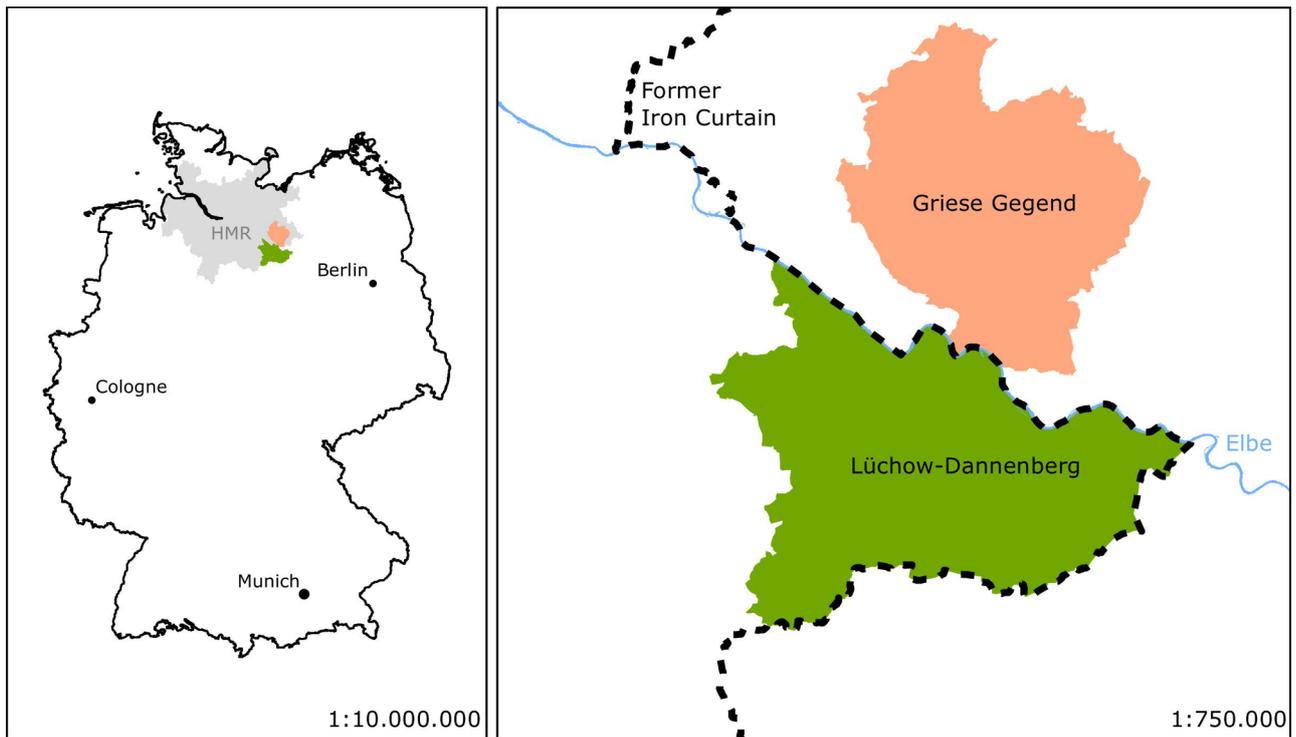
### **Case Study Region**

We selected the district Lüchow-Dannenberg and the adjacent southern part of the district Ludwigslust-Parchim (called Griese Gegend) for our case study, both located in the Hamburg Metropolitan Region (**Figure 2**). These regions were chosen because they are typical examples of underdeveloped rural areas. According to administrative, statistical data, both are dominated by agriculture and exhibit a sparse population (48 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>) with a negative population growth as well as a below-average GDP/capita. Additionally, both possess diverse landscapes and heritage but also show landscape changes. Thus, both cases are expected to provide in-depth insights regarding the perception of traditional and modern cultural markers.

Besides these commonalities, both cases differ in two ways. As a district, Lüchow-Dannenberg is an administrative unit. After various administrative reforms, the district received its contemporary composition in the 1970s. Contrarily, the Griese Gegend was never an administrative entity and is a historically grown region. By 'historically grown', we mean that it has been an accepted part of the social consciousness for a long time. This can be derived from historical literature referring to the Griese Gegend (cf. Klatt, 1959) and from information presented in local museums. The current importance of the region can be derived from regional association names (e.g. 'Griese Gegend e.V.') but also from touristic self-portrayals. Furthermore, both regions exhibit a diverging history, since they were located at two sides of the Iron Curtain until the 1990s (**Figure 2**). The contrasts concerning institutionalization and history offer interesting perspectives for the data interpretation.

### **Data collection**

Disclosing significant cultural markers on the individual level requires inquiries in the realm of feelings, beliefs and meanings. Such investigations with regard to place are amenable to qualitative approaches using open-ended interviews (Williams, 2014). A total of 55 semi-structured interviews were conducted in both study regions. Our



**Figure 2:** Location of the study regions (HMR = Hamburg Metropolitan Region).

**Table 1:** Number of interviewed professionals from different sectors in the Griesegegend (GG) and Lüchow-Dannenberg (LD).

Sector	GG	LD
Agriculture	2	3
Culture/heritage	5	7
Nature conservation	0	4
Regional development/tourism	3	6
Politics	2	1
Total	12	21

sample included various professionals from different sectors (**Table 1**), exhibiting a functional relationship to landscape and heritage. Functional relationships were defined to be land-use and activities related to landscape and heritage management (e.g. planning, marketing, protection, environmental education). The higher number of professionals in Lüchow-Dannenberg results from a higher stakeholder diversity in this region. Additionally, we involved randomly chosen laypersons living in the research areas (different ages, newcomers and natives, men and women). In Lüchow-Dannenberg we interviewed 10 laypersons; in the Griesegegend, 12. As presented in the Theory section, laypersons were included to avoid biases by only focusing on perspectives of influential, institutionalized stakeholders and their cultural marker perceptions. All participants were initially contacted by phone, informed about the research and asked for their consent to participate in the study. The

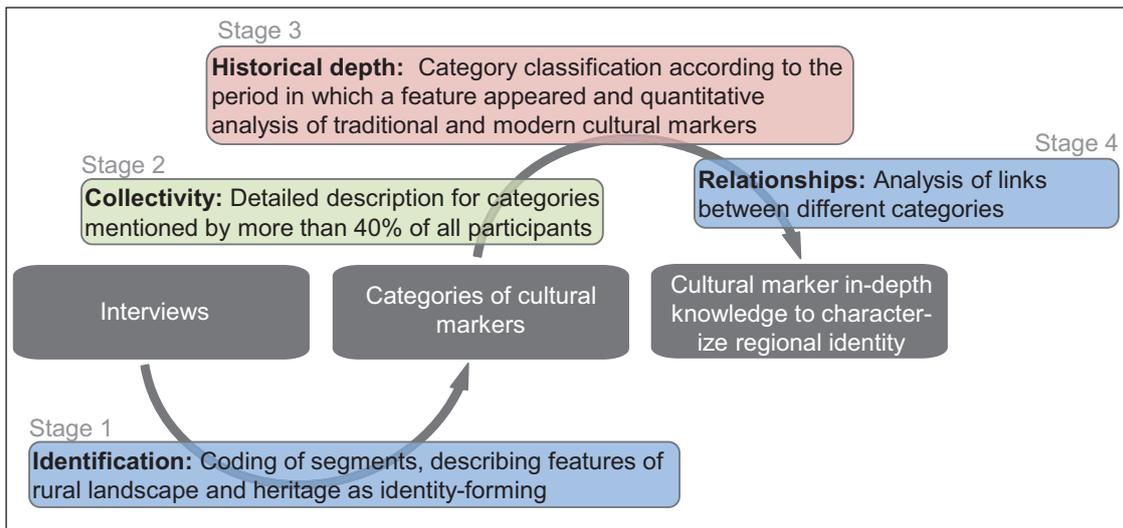
location and appointment for a face-to-face interview were determined based on participants' choice.

A guide was used in the interviews, comprising main questions (see Appendix) and some follow-up questions to elicit further details. The questions referred to the cognitive and/or the emotional dimension of regional identification. The interviews ranged between 30–90 minutes. All but one participant granted permission to tape-record. Ten interviews were transcribed verbatim. Because this interview material turns out not to be too ambiguous, we considered comprehensive protocols to be sufficient for all the others. The latter are detailed summaries, created by listening and regularly stopping the audio tape while paraphrasing all segments which refer to landscape and heritage.

**Data analysis**

Transcripts and protocols were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA. We undertook a qualitative content analysis to systematically describe the material in a particular aspect (Schreier, 2012), which was the range of discussed cultural markers. Our analysis comprised different stages: identification, collectivity, historical depth and relationships (**Figure 3**). On the identification stage, interview segments were selected which described features of rural landscapes and heritage as identity-forming. This was the case when a feature was:

- known and/or believed to be typical, distinctive, specific, outstandingly beautiful, belonging to the region, representing the region and/or



**Figure 3:** Data analysis procedure including qualitative (blue), quantitative (green) and mixed stages (red).

- linked to memories and experiences and/or
- linked to ideas of personal belonging, a sense of home and emotions (love, pride, happiness etc.).

This procedure excluded, on the one hand, statements with no relation to rural landscapes and heritage (e.g. about the industry, sports teams). On the other hand, functional and economic bonds were disregarded, because this type of human-place-relationship is not congruent with identification. From an iterative coding process, **categories of cultural markers** evolved. At this point, we included a first quantitative step. A detailed description was only conducted for categories mentioned by more than 40% of all participants (Stage 2, **collectivity**). The determination of this quantitative limit is a very pragmatic approach. But planning research tends to be strongly oriented to a practical purpose (Silva et al., 2014). We defined this threshold value because we are interested in the most important cultural markers to use them for the planning process rather than understanding every aspect of a regional identity discourse. Referring to our study aim, we assumed a relative importance and collective significance of frequently mentioned cultural markers.

Additionally, we classified the categories according to their perceived (i.e. imagined or real) **historical depth** (Stage 3). Historical depth was understood as the period over which a feature has appeared in the region. Based on the theoretical assumptions, we broadly differentiated between:

- Traditional cultural markers: Already present, when increasing landscape changes started to influence the region in the period after the Second World War.
- Modern cultural markers: Introduced after the Second World War, e.g. due to agricultural modernization and external influences.

Following the qualitative classification, a further quantitative step was included. This step analyzed the proportion between traditional and modern cultural

markers and compared the number of cultural marker subcategories in these two classes.

On the fourth stage, we analyzed perceived **relationships** between the categories, to highlight whether traditional and modern cultural markers are seen as linked or separated. Taken together, the information received on the different stages provides in-depth knowledge to characterize regional identity.

## Results

Next to the classification of traditional and modern cultural markers, data-driven coding resulted in a system of thematic cultural marker categories (main and subcategories). The following descriptions are structured based on this system. Subcategories are printed in bold. After interview quotations, the abbreviation 'IP#' stands for the respective interview participant.

### **Traditional cultural markers of collective significance** Landscape

Physical landscape features were considered as cultural markers in both study regions. Six subcategories were found in the Grieseggend. Among them was the perception of the surrounding as **pristine landscape**. Participants characterized their region as quiet, remote and less influenced by human activity (low population density, little traffic). Furthermore, they valued the diversity of the landscape to be rich and natural. This was underlined by references to particular species occurring in the region (migratory birds, wolves, game), which were, for example, perceived as natural elements that were absent in other areas (IP35). The **river system** was also seen as a cultural marker, with many participants emphasizing the distinctiveness and aesthetic quality of the Elbe, including some smaller rivers. **Sandy soils** constituted another identity-forming landscape feature. Respondents pointed to the gray soils with a limited productivity as a characterizing feature. This includes the largest shifting dune of Europe as a core element. In addition, the high proportion of large-sized, cohesive and mostly

human-made pine **woods** and the **plane landscape** were discussed. Some referred to the plane topography as 'endless' (IP49) and also as allowing one 'to look very deep into the landscape' (IP23). Finally, a large **heathland** located at the Griese Gegend center was perceived to be regionally peculiar. It was designated to be 'heart of the Griese Gegend' (IP35) and was valued due to its size and aesthetic quality.

In the adjacent region of Lüchow-Dannenberg, the same cultural markers were found, except the sandy soils and heathland. However, there were some slight differences in the descriptions. Participants also emphasized the **pristine landscape**, widely left in a natural state. Regarding the **river system**, interviewees stressed the undisturbed character of the Elbe and its 'largely untouched river landscape' (IP8). They also mentioned the high proportion of **woods**. Respondents underlined the plurality of wood types (including pine, oak, alder), the old age of the respective areas and their significance to nature conservation. Due to the latter, some participants used words like 'wild forest' (IP50) or 'primeval forests' (IP51). Topographical aspects were described similarly, highlighting the **plane landscape**.

#### Built structures

This category encompassed three subcategories in the Griese Gegend. Regarding **historic sites**, two buildings were repeatedly mentioned: A baroque palace in the town of Ludwigslust built in the 18th century and a fortress in the town Dömitz. The latter is constructed in medieval times and its distinctive layout and varied functions over time were stressed (military use, prison, museum). Both historic sites were valued due to their aesthetic quality and were considered to be steeped in history. Additionally, participants commented on **historic architecture**. This comprised the building stock of many old houses and timber-framework houses. Many made references to Bog Iron Ore, which is seen as a unique construction material of the Griese Gegend. It is believed to be an intensively used material, scarcely found in other regions. The third theme of this subcategory was the almost undisturbed baroque character of Ludwigslust, with specific buildings and a distinctive layout. Finally, some participants referred to the palace **parks and gardens** in Ludwigslust.

**Historic architecture** was the only subcategory found in Lüchow-Dannenberg. Some of the discussed features were comparable to those in the Griese Gegend (traditional building structures, old farming houses with timber framework). Moreover, the most frequently highlighted elements were circle villages (discussed in all but one interview). Participants perceived them as characteristic regional settlement structure, 'which unites the whole region' (IP16). Circle villages were valued due to the uniform arrangement of the similar-looking houses. They were further discussed as exhibiting a 'romantic village idyll' (IP16) and as 'landscape of longing' (IP45). Many stressed the specific combination of the high density and a little transformation degree to be peculiar.

#### History and intangible heritage

Five subcategories of history and intangible heritage were found in the Griese Gegend. Participants talked about the **region's name**, whereas almost everyone used the name 'Griese Gegend', though it is not the name of any official spatial entity. The word 'Gries' was described as a Low German word for 'gray' which was assumed to relate to other regional characteristics (see chapter 'Relationships between cultural markers'). Furthermore, interviewees referred to **poverty and migration** and discussed the former times' structural weakness, resulting in a high amount of inhabitants leaving the region for the USA. **Slavic influences** since medieval times were delineated to be a further peculiarity. Participants believed that traces of the former Slavic population remain in many place and family names, rooted in the Slavic language. Additionally, **literature** and regional authors were acknowledged as contributing to the regional character. Participants emphasized two widely known authors, living in the late 19th century. One of them originated from the region (J. Gillhoff, 1861–1930), the other was imprisoned in the area (F. Reuter, 1810–1874) and wrote a Low German novel about this time. **Low German** was also evaluated as a cultural marker. The language was described as still being spoken, although predominantly used by older inhabitants. Respondents described the maintenance of Low German as literature language to be a distinctive feature. They highlighted the significant efforts for its preservation as monthly held public readings and a yearly award for persons who are concerned in the conservation of Low German.

Participants in Lüchow-Dannenberg also referred to the **region's name**. However, many explained this as a controversial issue with differing views on regional names and boundaries. One participant complained: 'Our region's name is a catastrophe. We have at least five, six different regional demarcations for the different regional names' (IP14). Respondents mainly used the names 'Lüchow-Dannenberg', 'Elbtalau' and 'Wendland'. The denomination 'Wendland' was described as a traditional one. Others did not deny this, but claimed that it was mostly used within the last 15–20 years and especially in the field of marketing. Differing views also prevailed about the location of the 'Elbtalau' and 'Wendland', ranging from the whole district to specific sub-parts. The regional and sub-regional names and demarcations are believed to be causes for continuing deadlocked conflicts and institutional level 'trench wars' (IP45). One participant saw the roots of the inconsistent names and demarcations in local government reorganizations, beginning in the 1950s.

#### Modern Cultural markers of collective significance

This section presents all cultural markers of collective significance without historical depth, which is given when they were – according to the participant's perception – imposed on the regions after the Second World War.

#### Landscape

With a specific **heathland** in Lüchow-Dannenberg, we found one landscape-related modern cultural marker. The area is widely appreciated due to its aesthetic quality. Some participants referred to the unusual origin because

it was artificially created after a massive wood-fire in the 1970s. However, one participant questioned its identity-forming effect: 'It is fascinating ... but actually it is a product of coincidence and if you can identify with it ..., I would doubt' (IP13).

#### History and intangible heritage

Respondents in the Griesegegend described the former **Iron Curtain** as a formative feature. Many referred to a small village in the formerly restricted border area, suffering rigorous observation and limitations of inhabitant's everyday life until the 1990s. Today, a little museum is located there. Furthermore, interviewees mentioned a specific railway bridge. It was destroyed in the Second World War and remains a remarkable artifact. Finally, **arts and crafts** were believed as belonging to the Griesegegend. Some participants mentioned one specific pottery artisan, who started producing in the 1980s.

Three cultural markers in this regard were discussed by respondents from Lüchow-Dannenberg. The former **Iron Curtain** was regularly brought up and the extremely remote and isolated position of the district during this period was stressed. Many participants highlighted that the region was surrounded by the former Iron Curtain from three sides and that it 'was the district with the largest proportionate part of the inner-German border' (IP12). After becoming a nuclear depository site in the 1970s, an **anti-nuclear movement** significantly influenced the region in different ways, as many participants elaborated in detail. Both a division among the inhabitants into supporters and opponents as well as changes in the society due to many newcomers and increasing societal engagement were discussed in this context. Finally, all but two highlighted the region's dense network of artists and creative characters (subcategory **arts and crafts**). Since the 1990s, they have been hosting an annual event, bringing many people into the region and in the meantime functioning as an important economic factor.

#### Land-use

**Sea buckthorn** production and marketing were raised continuously in the Griesegegend. Respondents reported about the introduction of sea buckthorn in the

1970s by the former GDR-government, resulting in two companies that continue to produce and manufacture sea-buckthorn.

In Lüchow-Dannenberg two modern, land-use-related cultural markers were found. Respondents referred to intense efforts in the **renewable energy** sector. Although some were critical with the resulting high amount of maize cultivation, the majority of participants exhibited a positive attitude towards this land-use. Furthermore, an above-average amount of **organic agriculture** and respective regional products were described as cultural markers.

A summarizing and quantifying illustration of all presented results is given in **Table 2**. In the Griesegegend, the total number of traditional cultural markers is higher than in Lüchow-Dannenberg. The most apparent imbalance appeared in the category 'History and intangible heritage'. Contrarily, we found more modern cultural markers in Lüchow-Dannenberg.

#### Relationships between cultural markers

Data-driven coding revealed that links between different categories were seen by participants in both study areas, mainly as cause-and-effect chains. However, only a small number of the participants referred to relations (the most frequently discussed link between two categories was mentioned by ten interviewees).

In the Griesegegend, participants mainly considered traditional cultural markers to be interlinked. A central cultural marker of the Griesegegend is the perceived former **poverty and migration**, which participants described as related to:

- the **region's name**, because the word 'Gries' might relate to poor former inhabitants' gray clothes,
- **literature**, because the former poverty and migration constitutes the background of J. Gillhoff's most famous novel,
- **sandy soils**, because they contributed to the former poverty,
- **historic architecture**, because dominating poverty favored the use of Big Iron Ore as an easy-to-find construction material.

**Table 2:** Number of cultural marker subcategories in both study regions (GG = Griesegegend; LD = Lüchow-Dannenberg).

Classification	Main Category	GG	LD
Traditional cultural markers	Landscape	6	4
	Built structures	3	1
	History and intangible heritage	5	1
	<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>6</b>
Modern cultural markers	Landscape	0	1
	History and intangible heritage	2	3
	Land-use and regional products	1	2
	<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>6</b>

Additionally, the **region's name** was linked to the **sandy soils**, given that the word 'Gries' might also refer to the sandy and therefore gray-colored soils. Furthermore, respondents considered the Dömitz fortress to be famous, because F. Reuter was imprisoned there and wrote a book about this time (categories **historic sites** and **literature**). Respondents also made connections between modern and traditional cultural markers. The **river system** was believed to be in an almost untransformed condition due to the former line of the **Iron Curtain**. Some other participants pointed out that the modern cultural marker **sea buckthorn** is related to the **sandy soils** because the former was brought into the area due to the less nutritious soils.

Respondents of Lüchow-Dannenberg did not link any traditional cultural markers with each other. Instead, a group of modern cultural markers formed a related cluster. A central marker is the **anti-nuclear movement**, which is seen as a causing factor for the emergence of an above-average amount of:

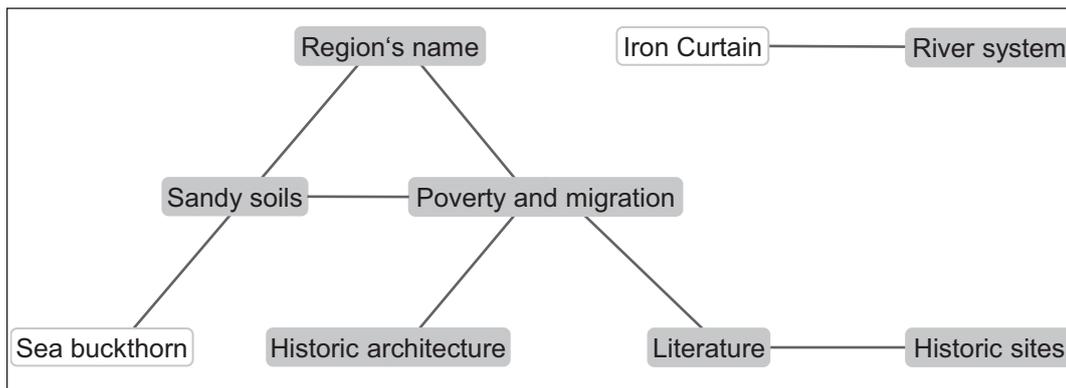
- inhabitants engaged in **arts and crafts**,
- **renewable energy** production and
- **organic agriculture**.

One participant explained this in detail:

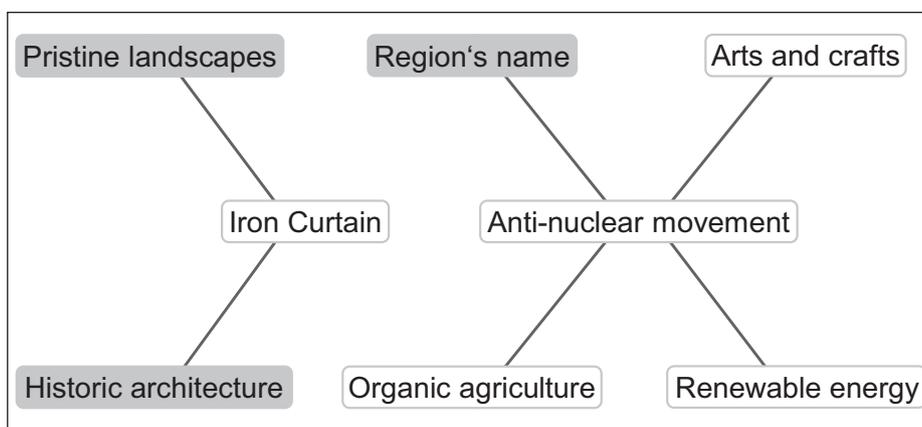
Out of this movement, a bunch of things emerged, foregrounding the essence of the region. Due to that, there are many things which were formed as a countermovement. Due to that, we have a high share of organic agriculture. Due to that, we have a renewable energy region. You have to understand it as a mesh of initiatives, against [the nuclear depository in the village] Gorleben. (IP22)

The protest movement was further deemed to be related to the **region's name** because it used the name 'Wendland' and made it widely known. Some judged this relationship positively. Others were critical and argued that due to this relation, the name exhibits a very negative connotation. Next, the former **Iron Curtain** was believed to be a sustaining factor for the **pristine landscape** and the **historic architecture** of the circle villages.

A summarizing illustration of the interrelationships as seen by the participants is given in **Figures 4** and **5**.



**Figure 4:** Summarizing illustration of linked cultural markers in the Griese Gegend (traditional cultural markers = gray, modern cultural markers = white).



**Figure 5:** Summarizing illustration of linked cultural markers in Lüchow-Dannenberg (traditional cultural markers = gray, modern cultural markers = white).

## Discussion

### ***Traditional and modern cultural markers of collective significance***

In the study, we assessed and determined cultural markers – understood as features of rural landscapes and heritage, perceived as regional identity reference points – using qualitative interviews with professionals and laypersons from two adjacent study regions. Our results exposed a wide range of cultural markers with regard to landscape, built structures, history, intangible heritage and land-use. We set out to determine cultural markers exhibiting collective significance, which were defined as responses appearing in more than 40% of the interviews. Furthermore, we realized cultural markers with historical depth, meaning that they were already present in the region when modernization started to significantly change rural areas in the period after the Second World War. Others resulted from contemporary development, which we called modern cultural markers. The results obtained are on the one hand in line with other scholars, who found evidence for the identity-forming effect of traditional landscape features and heritage (Davenport and Anderson, 2005; Fritz-Vietta, La Vega-Leinert and Stoll-Kleemann, 2015; Simon, Huigen and Groote, 2010). Contrarily, the identity-forming effect of modern landscape features is less investigated. The discovered modern cultural markers indicate that newly introduced features are not necessarily alienating. This is underlined by the links between some modern and traditional cultural markers in participants' statements, especially in the Griese Gegend. The embedding of modern cultural markers signifies that recently introduced features are not inevitably perceived to be dichotomous to traditional cultural markers. However, modern cultural markers can also build new ideas of distinctiveness and difference (as observed in Lüchow-Dannenberg). These results indicate that regional identity reference points encompass traditional as well as modern landscape and heritage.

### ***Characterizing regional identity based on in-depth cultural marker knowledge***

Because cultural markers are reference points of the shared sense of 'one-ness', distinctiveness and difference in both study regions, the achieved in-depth knowledge offers insights into the respective regional identities.

The Griese Gegend identity entails a high number of traditional cultural markers, mainly relating to landscape, built structures, history and intangible heritage. A small number of modern cultural markers are integrated (sea buckthorn, Iron Curtain) and seen to be linked to traditional cultural markers. Though the found relationships must not be over-interpreted due to the qualitative study design, the level of relatedness indicates a coherent identity. With that in mind, the Griese Gegend identity tends to be consistent and rooted in landscape and heritage, while modern reference points extend it.

In contrast, a smaller number of traditional cultural markers constituted the identity of Lüchow-Dannenberg. Next to the circle villages, mostly landscape-related features function as significant regional identity

reference points. Apart from that, there is a detached cluster of modern cultural markers, with the anti-nuclear movement as a central point. The latter is only linked to one traditional cultural marker (region's name), however in a conflicting way. A possible explanation is Castells' (1997) idea of a resistance identity, generated by actors in a devalued position who build trenches of resistance. Out of the felt degradation by becoming a nuclear waste depository site, a strong anti-nuclear movement emerged which induced several new impulses (e.g. the high level of organic agriculture, renewable energies, arts and crafts) and a collective identity of its own. With this in mind as well as with the different ideas on regional demarcations and names, the Lüchow-Dannenberg identity appears to be fragmented, conflicting and only partially rooted in traditional landscape and heritage.

The differing regional identity characterizations underpin the need for rigorous and place-specific investigations to link regional identity and planning. Therefore, our research highlights the requirement of robust methodological knowledge to analyze regional identity.

### ***Limitations and further methodological requirements***

The results suggest that individual interviews and the proposed data analysis were useful approaches to capture traditional and modern cultural markers of collective significance. However, our results contain some methodological limitations that require discussion. Using the frequency of a cultural marker category as an indicator of its collective significance creates challenges. From a methodological standpoint, the quantification of qualitative data is a source of error (Kruse, 2015). Indeed, our procedure of excluding less frequently mentioned cultural markers is prone to overlook those with relevance for specific subgroups and therefore prone to marginalize their perspectives. Future research should be devoted to the question of how potential minority perspectives can be considered in the method design.

Furthermore, making conclusions about collective regional identities from individual, isolated responses (as we received in our interviews) underlies the risk of fallacies (Keating, 1998). It is compulsory to see the presented method as allowing first appraisals of important regional identity reference points and as a preliminary characterization. To receive a more sophisticated image, additional analyses are needed. One remedy could be to conduct focus groups which may be an avenue to address these concerns. In focus groups, a specific topic is discussed with the purpose of exploring ideas in a public setting and to receiving insights which would not emerge in the absence of interaction (Halperin and Heath, 2011). Combining the initial interviews with the recommended further steps provides a promising approach to link regional identity and planning systematically.

### ***Implications for spatial planning***

Despite the cautious interpretation, our findings already indicate the potential of cultural markers to be used in the design of rural planning processes. Cultural marker

knowledge provides a solid information basis for rural planners and can help to determine participation strategy priorities. A way to identify an appropriate set of cultural markers for the next planning steps is to mirror them with existing stakeholders' visions and activities. In-depth knowledge about cultural markers could be advanced and refined into a kind of 'strategic regional identity' or vision for planning. This vision would be rooted in rural landscape and heritage as well as in regional identity and stakeholders' capacities, efforts and ideas for future development. In practical application, this can be realized through conventional methods in the initial phase of participative processes like stakeholder analysis, focus groups and workshops (Ridder et al., 2006). Stakeholder analysis, as used in natural resource management (e.g. Prell, Hubacek and Reed, 2009), supports the identification of central and leading but also of absent stakeholder with regard to cultural markers. The structures of the respective regional identities, which is fragmented and conflicting in Lüchow-Dannenberg but consistent in the Griese Gegend, constitute the background to which further planning steps have to be adjusted.

Finally, our results provide two general insights. On the one hand, it became evident, that comparable natural conditions in both study areas led to comparable landscape-related cultural markers. A diverging recent and ancient history, however, resulted in discriminating cultural markers. This underlines the general importance of history and intangible heritage for regional identities. Consequently, it is significant for rural planners intending to understand and utilize regional identity for the improvement of the planning process. In this regard, Ramos et al. (2016) argue that no general indicators exist for what they call landscape identity, but that the past, in general, is of outstanding relevance. A related point is that our study signified the existence of a coherent regional identity in a historically grown but not administrative region (Griese Gegend). Charton-Vachet and Lombart (2015) made similar claims that identification with non-administrative areas exists. However, most spatial planners are used to seeing administrative entities as planning regions. Our results show that non-administrative but historically grown landscapes and regions can be a promising alternative starting point in efforts to foster spatial planning in rural areas by building upon regional identity.

### Conclusions

Our case study demonstrated the importance of traditional and modern cultural markers as regional identity reference points in rural areas. Those of collective significance can be investigated by the method developed and provide first insights into a given regional identity. The findings reveal that the cultural marker approach adds new perspectives to traditional ways of spatial planning and extends the methodological knowledge to systematically link regional identity with spatial planning. In this way, our results provide useful input for the design and implementation of bottom-up planning strategies

for harnessing the potentials of rural landscapes and heritage.

However, the integration of regional identity into spatial planning based on these first appraisals remains challenging. Additional methods of data collection and analysis are needed to foster the understanding of the respective identities. Building upon regional identity in rural planning processes also requires some further steps, such as workshops and stakeholder analysis. These additions must be adapted to each region due to the different characteristics of the regional identities. One key finding of the case study is that linking regional identity and spatial planning in a systematic way calls for a combination of different methods. Our research suggests that there is no single standard method for utilizing regional identity in spatial planning which could be easily transferred to other regions.

Possible areas for future research could include further case studies to validate the usability of the proposed method in other planning contexts and situations – in administrative as well as in non-administrative, historically grown regions. Particular attention should be paid to cultural markers that are relevant for specific sub-groups in the society and which were intentionally overlooked here. We also need to further investigate the advancement of the regional identity into a strategic identity/vision, as proposed in the discussion.

### Additional File

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendix.** Main questions for the semi-structured interviews. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16993/rl.41.s1>

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### Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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