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Dealing with the loss of the village supermarket: The perceived effects two years after closure

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Abstract

In 2015, the local supermarket of the depopulating village of Ulrum closed its doors. After a first survey around the closure, a second survey was conducted two years later, to investigate changes in the different meanings of the local supermarket and the perceived effects of its closure over time. The results show that respondents state that the liveability and status of the village have decreased because of the loss of the supermarket. This strongly relates to the symbolic and village level meanings of the supermarket: A village 'needs' a supermarket for the villages' status and as a place to do groceries, and people feel that a village without a supermarket is a village without a heart. The article concludes by alleging that the symbolic meaning of facilities plays an important role in explaining the perceived effects of the loss of the local supermarket.

KEYWORDS

liveability, nostalgia, place change, rural services and facilities, senses of loss

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2015, the local SPAR supermarket of the depopulating village of Ulrum closed its doors. Ulrum is situated in the north of The Netherlands and has approximately 1,360 inhabitants (in 2018). In the past decades, the village has lost most of its facilities and services, including

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the local supermarket, which is one of the most recent examples. A number of villagers were dissatisfied with the closure of the supermarket and tried to mobilise the village population to prevent it from happening. However, their efforts did not have the desired effect. The closure of village facilities and services often goes hand in hand with protests and negative emotions towards these losses (Christiaanse & Haartsen, 2017; Kroismayr, 2018, 2019). The loss of a facility is a (place) change that has to be dealt with. Such changes have an impact on both individuals and households and the village and the community. Processes of dealing with place change can be explained by taking the emotional bonds between people and places into consideration. If places change, such place meanings or place attachments are (temporary) disrupted, and people have to deal with that (Brown & Perkins, 1992; Devine-Wright, 2009; Devine-Wright & Clayton, 2010).

Facilities and services can have functional, social and symbolic meanings for individuals and communities (Amcoff et al., 2011; Christiaanse & Haartsen, 2017; Haartsen & Van Wissen, 2012; Woods, 2005). If a village loses its supermarket, primary school or public transport connection, individuals and households have to adapt their daily or weekly routines to replace its primary function. But they will also lose a social meeting place. Moreover, facilities also have symbolic meanings for a village. For example, primary schools often are perceived as a symbol of a healthy, viable and future-proof community. Increasingly, the importance of the social and symbolic meanings of facilities and services are acknowledged in understanding the impact of closure and loss for individual households and village communities (Christiaanse & Haartsen, 2017; Oncescu & Giles, 2012), and this article aims to contribute to this.

In Ulrum, a study was conducted to examine how villagers experienced the loss of their village supermarket, shortly after its closure in 2015, and how they thought it would affect their lives and the quality of life in the village. Results revealed that unlike popular belief, the fact that villagers had to do their groceries in an alternative supermarket further away did not explain the negative reactions towards the closure. More important were the social and symbolic meanings of the local supermarket for the villagers (Christiaanse & Haartsen, 2017; Haartsen et al., 2016). To investigate if the meanings of the supermarket for the villagers and the perceived effects of the loss of the supermarket on their lives and the community have changed over time, a second study was conducted in Ulrum, 2 years after the closure. This article discusses the results of this second study. A policy report was also published on this (in Dutch, Gieling & Haartsen 2017). In both studies in Ulrum, a questionnaire was distributed to all households. In 2015, the response rate was 48% of all households, and in 2017, it was 39%. Because we surveyed the same households, it is possible to compare the answers in order to estimate how the different meanings of the supermarket may have changed 2 years after its closure. It was anticipated that residents would find having a supermarket in the village less important than in the first study since they got used to living in a village without a supermarket and had experienced the long-term effects of not having a local supermarket.

The article builds on the theoretical framework of Christiaanse & Haartsen (2017), by using the three types of meanings of facilities and services (functional, social and symbolic) at both village and individual level. In contrast to the first study, that took place shortly after closure, we do not aim to use place meanings for explaining first initial reactions towards closure. Instead, we explore if the residents' meanings of the supermarket have changed over time and how these (changed) place meanings contribute to explaining the perceived effects of the loss of the supermarket for the village and for themselves personally, a couple of years later. This way, we go beyond most models on the disruption of place attachment due to place change, which ends with the final phase of opposition or acceptance of the change (Brown & Perkins, 1992; Devine-Wright, 2009). In this article, we intend to find out how villagers perceive the effects of the loss of the local supermarket,

a certain time after this final phase of accepting the loss. On the village level, we look at the effects of the closure on the perceived liveability in the village, on senses of community solidarity and on the status of the village. For individuals, we explore whether the closure affects respondents' intentions to become active in the village community, the perceived impact of the value of their house and whether they have to make more expenditures to reach an alternative supermarket. We explore if the functional, social and symbolic meanings of the supermarket may explain these effects.

This article starts with discussing previous research on place meanings and senses of loss of rural facilities and services and the perceived effects of such loss for the village community. The quantitative research method that we used is further detailed in the methodology section. The results section starts with an inventory of how and where people found alternative supermarkets to do their groceries. After that, we present the meanings of the local supermarket two years after its closure, and if and how these place meanings help explain the perceived effects of the loss of the supermarket. This is followed by the conclusion.

PLACE MEANINGS AND THE LOSS OF LOCAL FACILITIES

Meanings of facilities for rural communities

A complex combination of economies of scale, increased mobility, changes in consumer behaviour, declining and ageing populations and specific policy measures due to welfare state reforms have led to a steady decline of many facilities and service in rural areas all over Europe (Brereton et al., 2011; Bock, 2016; Manthorpe & Livsey 2009; De Vries et al., 2016; White et al., 1997; Woods, 2011). Although it is a popular belief that depopulation and the decline of facilities and services go hand in hand and reinforce each other, it is difficult to prove (causal) relationships between demographic behaviour and the availability of services (Amcoff, 2012; Barakat, 2015; Elshof et al., 2015; Elshof et al., 2017). For rural Sweden, Amcoff et al. (2011) found that rural shop closures do not significantly affect rural migration patterns. In The Netherlands, the closure and absence of a primary school do relate to stronger outward flows of families with young children from villages but do not influence inward flows of families with young children (Elshof et al., 2015).

Not all rural regions are affected by the decline of facilities and services in the same way. Especially in more peripheral rural areas with low population densities and declining populations that are located relatively far away from larger cities, the loss of facilities has a strong impact on the villages and their inhabitants. Here, rural residents have fewer alternative facilities available and often they are only available at large distances from their homes (Gieling et al., 2019a; Manthorpe & Livsey, 2009; Shucksmith et al., 2009). In the more densely populated and highly urbanised rural areas in Western Europe, such as The Netherlands, alternative facilities often are available relatively close by and most rural residents are no longer dependent on local facilities because they have access to (car) mobility. Still, also in these areas, some inhabitants are affected by the loss of facilities and services. Especially less mobile and elderly village inhabitants may experience difficulties in finding alternatives (Christiaanse & Haartsen, 2017; Clarke & Banga, 2010). Also, many villagers, mobile or not, attach great importance to those facilities that (still) are locally available (De Vries et al., 2016).

Thus far, concerns about disappearing facilities have mainly focused on two types of meanings of those facilities (Clarke & Banga, 2010; Gieling et al., 2019b; Mount & Cabras, 2016). The first and most concrete is their primary or functional meaning in the everyday lives of villagers.

They provide people with groceries, education, public transport or leisure time activities such as sports or cultural festivities. Closure of such facilities can have a large impact on daily life patterns and routines. Village residents have to adapt to these routines by exploring alternatives in neighbouring settlements. The second is their social meaning. Facilities and services play a role in the social aspects of rural community life (Amcoff et al., 2011; Haartsen & van Wissen 2012; Oncescu & Giles, 2012). As (in)formal meeting places, they form an ideal setting for deliberate or spontaneous interactions and bring people together. In their role of meeting places, these facilities contribute to local ties and maintain and develop social cohesion and feelings of community solidarity (Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014; Chalmers et al., 2012; Mount & Cabreas, 2016; Oldenburg, 1991). Increasingly, a third place meaning, the symbolic meaning of facilities and services on the individual and village level, is thought to be of importance in understanding dealing with loss. Often, villagers feel that the availability of facilities and services adds to the identity and status of the village and that it signals that the village is vital and vigorous. Having a primary school stands for having children, and children are symbols for a healthy, viable and sustainable local community (Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014; Egelund & Laustsen, 2006; Witten et al., 2001; Woods, 2005). The loss of the primary school can be perceived as the deathblow of the villages, as it symbolises the loss of the new generation. Similarly, the local supermarket can be seen as symbols of a self-reliant independent village. Having connections to public transport is symbolic of being an accessible village. The presence and architecture of police stations can contribute to reassurance, by giving people a feeling of security and safety (Millie, 2012).

Via the different types of place meanings, having facilities and services contribute to the liveability or quality of life in a village. Hence, the loss of local facilities, such as the village school or supermarket, is thought to reduce the quality of life or liveability in the village (Amcoff et al., 2011; Haartsen & Venhorst, 2010; Oncescu & Giles, 2012; Ruth & Franklin, 2014). However, the relation between facilities and liveability is not always clear or straightforward (Gieling & Haartsen, 2017). For example, the local village school is not decisive in making a village liveable or keeping a local society lively (Egelund & Laustsen 2006; Gardenier et al. 2011; Kovács 2012). Community solidarity and social cohesion can also be very strong in villages without a local school, supermarket or sports club. For this, it is important to have an alternative place where one can meet other villagers (Oncescu & Giles, 2014). The loss of a facility may also stimulate and motivate village inhabitants to develop bottom-up citizen initiatives to organise the service themselves. In several countries, examples of reuse and redevelopment of supermarkets, community centres or public schools by citizen initiatives can be found (De Haan et al. 2019; Steinführer & Moser, 2016; Ubels et al., 2019c). Some researchers also demonstrated the effect of the availability of facilities on housing prices. For example, in the USA, Lyson (2002) notes that communities with schools have higher housing values, and Lamichhane (2013) found that neighbourhoods with a supermarket have significantly higher housing values than neighbourhoods without a supermarket. In the empirical part of this article, we will explore the perceived effects of the loss of the local supermarket on the liveability of the village, senses of solidarity, the status of Ulrum, the active participation of villagers in community life, the value of their house and the (travel) expenditures for grocery shopping.

Place meanings and the effects of loss

Most models of the disruption of place attachment due to place change, distinguish several phases in which people deal with changes in their (residential) environments (e.g., Browns & Perkins,

1992; Devine-Wright, 2009). It starts with becoming aware of the upcoming developments or changes, followed by evaluating and anticipating them and ending with opposing against or accepting. In all phases, the different meanings of the place play a role in the explanation of people's reactions to these changes. In the specific case that we discuss in this article, the phase of protesting is already in the past, and all inhabitants have (had to) accept the fact that the supermarket closed its doors. The meanings of the supermarket and how villagers perceive the effects of the loss of the local supermarket may have changed over a certain period of time after the final phase of accepting the loss.

To our knowledge, not a lot of research has been done on the effects of the loss of facilities in the longer term. A notable exception is the work of Egelund and Laustsen (2006) on the consequences of school closures in Denmark on local societies around 10 years after closure. Based on observations and interviews with local inhabitants in villages that lost their primary school, they found that the closure of the school is not the death blow to the local society. They found three typical scenarios in which a local village society could develop after the school closure: the 'lively local society', the 'dying local society' and the 'small island society'. The 'lively local society' has relatively easily adapted to the new situation. Such communities are situated within commuting distance of bigger cities with lots of alternatives available. The 'dying local societies' are located beyond commuting distance from larger centres or in relatively isolated depopulating areas of Denmark with low population densities and no access to public transport. For inhabitants in these villages, it has been more difficult to find alternatives for all place meanings of the school. The 'small island societies' are similar to the dying societies, except that depopulation has been even stronger, and alternative facilities are even more difficult to reach due to their isolated location. Another notable exception is the article of Amcoff et al. (2011) on the effect of the closure of local shops on rural migration patterns in Sweden. In addition to their quantitative analysis, which showed no significant effects of rural shops closures on migration patterns, they did a qualitative interview-based case study to get more information on the importance of the village shop. They found that the village shop already lost its attraction because of the relatively high prices and the limited choice and lower quality of the products sold. Moreover, the local shop was mostly missed because of its social function as the centre of information dissemination.

In our research into the meanings of the local supermarket, we expect that village residents will less strongly attach to different meanings of having a supermarket in the village, on both the individual/household and the village level, two years after closure. We expect that they have got used to the loss and attach less meaning to having a supermarket. This hypothesis is also based on the results of a study into the perceived importance of facilities for rural citizens in the Dutch province of Friesland, where rural inhabitants tended to especially attach meaning to facilities they still have and not so much to those that were lost in the past (De Vries et al., 2017).

However, it is also possible that people have developed some sort of nostalgia towards having facilities and service in the village. This may result in attaching more meanings to having such facilities and services in the village after the loss. Nostalgia can be defined as 'a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy ... nostalgia is ... a superimposition of two images—of home and abroad, of past and present, of dream and everyday life' (Boym, 2007, p. 7). Boym (2001, 2007) distinguishes two types of nostalgia: the restorative and the reflective. Restorative nostalgia attempts to reconstruct a lost past or condition. Reflective nostalgia is about the longing itself, about existential, yearning feelings of loss and uncertainty (Boym, 2001; Lundgren, 2010).

Both types of nostalgia often occur simultaneously. Nostalgia can also be understood as a selective use of past memories to overcome loss or to idealise the past (Lundgren, 2010). In the context of the loss of facilities, nostalgia can play a role in different ways. It can form a part of the rural idyllic image of the 'ideal' village, of which local facilities and services form an important aspect (Markham & Bosworth 2016). But being nostalgic can also be a phase in dealing with the loss, after the acceptance of the change.

METHODS

The case of Ulrum

Ulrum is a depopulating village in the north of The Netherlands that has lost over 18% of its population between 1995 and 2018 (Statistics Netherlands). In the same period, many local businesses disappeared, such as the post office, two banks, the police station, general practitioner, pharmacy, two primary schools, bakery, a supermarket, shoe store, cafe, restaurant, library, hardware store, clothing store and bike repair shop (Christiaanse & Haartsen, 2017). Although a meeting centre, local café and soccer club are still present in the village, many inhabitants remember that Ulrum used to be a vibrant village with ample facilities. As a reaction to all these losses, the local self-governance initiative 'Project Ulrum 2034' started in 2010, with a primary goal to encourage local initiatives that invested in the physical and social community environment to increase the liveability of the village. It includes many subprojects with different goals led by different working groups. Some projects, for example, try to develop a multifunctional centre and a playground, and the upgrading of houses (see Ubels et al. 2019a, 2019b for more details on this project).

In June 2015, the local and privately owned SPAR grocery shop had to close its doors. The initiatives of a number of villagers to retain the supermarket for the village turned out to be in vain. With the closure, the village lost an ATM, a pickup point for medicine and a postal service as well. The number of jobs that were lost due to the closure was very limited. The supermarket closed because it was no longer economically viable. Many inhabitants of Ulrum chose not to do their groceries in the local supermarket but preferred larger and cheaper supermarkets in one of the surrounding villages. These can be reached by a 5 min car drive from the centre of Ulrum (Figure 1). In addition, there was a mobile shop with a limited supply of groceries that serviced the farms and outer fringes of the village. After the closure, this mobile shop was allowed to make regular stops in the centre of Ulrum. To ensure that the elderly were still able to have access to a supermarket, the village citizen initiative 'Project Ulrum 2034' started a voluntary-run transportation system to drive vulnerable inhabitants to and from nearby supermarkets on a regular basis.

Data collection, structure of the survey and variables

To investigate how people felt about the supermarket closure and what factors were most relevant to their reaction, a first survey was conducted shortly before the closure in May 2015 (see Christiaanse & Haartsen, 2017). Two years later, in October 2017, a second survey was distributed aiming to investigate how Ulrum's residents have coped with the loss of the supermarket and how perceived effects of the closure may have changed over time.



FIGURE 1 Distance of supermarkets from Ulrum (Source: Christiaanse & Haartsen, 2017)

To be able to compare this study's results with the previous one, a similar data collection procedure as in 2015 was conducted. Again, 626 questionnaires were distributed (the number of inhabited houses in Ulrum) door-to-door asking one adult person per household to fill in the questionnaire. Participants were given the choice to have the questionnaire collected or to return it in a post-paid envelope. In total, 244 households responded, resulting in a 39% response rate. The response rate in 2015 was higher: 48%. This may relate to the fact that the closure was more topical in 2015. In addition, 149 questionnaires were filled in by the same households in 2015 and 2017. Just as in 2015, woman and older age categories were slightly overrepresented in the survey.

The content of the 2017 survey was almost similar to the one in 2015. A few more questions were added with the aim to further scrutinise some results that were found in the 2015 study. In particular, the 2017 survey gave more attention to the relation between the symbolic meaning of a supermarket and feelings of loss.

The questionnaire consisted of three parts. In the first section, participants were asked how and where they purchased their daily groceries and where they now go. This allowed for finding out how they adapted their daily routines to the new situation. The second section consisted of six closed questions on the perceived effects of the closure, which people could rate from 1 'increased', 2 'a little bit increased', 3 'neutral', 4 'a little bit decreased' and 5 'decreased'. For interpretation purposes, we reverse-coded the statement on perceived travel expenditures, so

all statements read from positive to negative. These questions refer to how inhabitants were personally affected by the closure on an individual level (active participation in village life, house value and travel expenditures) and how they believed the closure had affected various dimensions of quality of village life (perceptions of liveability, solidarity and status/identity of the village). Furthermore, nine statements on place meanings of a local supermarket were included in the survey, to further develop the framework of place meanings that may explain perceived effects and adaptive behaviour to changes in facilities and services. The statements refer to the functional, social and symbolic meaning of a supermarket. Some statements question the individual memories, emotions and behaviour about the supermarket, while others refer to the importance of 'collectively having' a supermarket for various reasons. A number of these statements were also asked in the 2015 study and the respondents' answers to these statements will be compared in Section 4.2. Respondents were asked to indicate if they (dis)agree with each specific statement on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 being 'totally disagree' and 5 being 'totally agree'. In the third section, respondents were asked to fill out their socio-demographic characteristics.

Linear regression analysis

The aim of this article is to investigate how the place meanings of a local supermarket may have changed over time and how these (changed) place meanings contribute to explaining the perceived effects of the loss of the supermarket for the village and themselves personally, 2 years after the closure. We anticipated that residents would generally attach less meaning to having a supermarket in the village than in the 2015 study since they had time to get used to living in a village without a supermarket. As most people have access to one or multiple cars, driving to an alternative supermarket should not have caused major long-term inconveniences.

We used a non-parametric Wilcoxon signed-rank test to compare if answers given by the households who participated in both surveys have changed significantly. We also employed multiple linear regression analysis to assess which forms of the supermarket's meaning are correlated with various perceived effects of the supermarkets' closure while controlling for a number of socio-demographic variables. Prompted by the theory in Section 2, three multiple item scales were developed based on the nine place meaning statements. These scales were included in the regression analyses, representing primary, social and symbolic meanings of the supermarket. The high Cronbach's alphas ($\alpha \geq 0.73$) prove the validity and reliability of the constructed scales.

The regression model estimates how the three constructed types of place meanings and various personal characteristics influence the strength of the perceived effects. A positive β -coefficient means that an increased value on the independent variable increases the probability of stronger perceived effects. If the sign of the β -coefficient is negative, an increase in the value of the independent variable leads to a lower probability of having these effects.

Comparison of surveys

In the 2017 survey, similar descriptive results were yielded as in the 2015 study, which makes both datasets suitable for comparison (Table 1). The only notable difference is that in the current study, people more often indicate to have access to one or multiple cars: 79% in 2015 versus 87% in 2017.

TABLE 1 Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents

Socio-demographic characteristics	2015 (N = 312)	2017 (N = 244)
Sex		
Female	66%	63%
Male	34%	37%
Average age	57 years	59 years
Age categories		
18–64 years	64%	60%
65–75 years	18%	25%
76 years and older	18%	14%
Education		
Low	55%	52%
Medium	31%	30%
High	14%	19%
Car access		
Yes	79%	87%
No	21%	13%
Average length of residence	33 years	35 years
Length of residence categories		
0–10 years	17%	12%
11–30 years	33%	34%
31 years or more	50%	55%

Note: 1 = Results may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

PERCEIVED EFFECTS OF THE LOSS OF SUPERMARKET, 2 YEARS AFTER CLOSURE

Changing the daily routines

In order to contextualise potential changes in place meanings and the perceived effects of the loss of the supermarket, it is helpful to know how important the SPAR used to be for doing their groceries, and how and where our respondents found an alternative to do so. In the 2017 survey, 91% of the respondents stated to have used the SPAR supermarket for grocery shopping before it closed its doors, and 74% visited the SPAR once a week or more. This is similar to the 2015 results (94% and 72%, respectively, see Christiaanse & Haartsen, 2017). After the closure, a number of villagers had to develop new routines for their grocery shopping. The majority of our respondents indicate to go to the neighbouring village Leens (3 km from Ulrum) in order to do so. In this village, two large supermarkets are available. The (smaller) supermarkets in other neighbouring villages are considered to be a less attractive alternative. Only a few inhabitants order groceries online for home delivery. Please note that our respondents may have already used these other venues for doing their groceries before the SPAR closed its doors. In fact, this was indeed mentioned in the 2015 study, and it was also indicated that this shopping behaviour contributed to the actual closure of the SPAR (Christiaanse & Haartsen, 2017). So the venues we present as alternatives for the SPAR

supermarket in Ulrum may not be *new* routines but rather a continuation or a strengthening of already existing routines.

A total of 13% of the 2017 sample indicates to have visited the SPAR in Ulrum every day. Not only elderly and people with a disability fall in this category: Also, a number of young people (mostly women with young children) made use of the SPAR on a daily basis. Almost half of this group (44%) now indicates to make use of the driving supermarket that attends Ulrum on a regular basis. People who hardly or never visited the SPAR rarely make use of this facility (5%). These groups predominantly either go to one of the larger supermarkets in the village of Leens or prefer to visit an alternative supermarket elsewhere. They mentioned, for example, organic supermarkets in the city of Groningen (approximately 30 min driving distance) as their main source for groceries.

Place meanings of a local supermarket; shortly after the closure and two years later

In this section, we present the responses to the nine statements on meanings of the supermarket and compare the answers to the statements from this study with those of 2015. Table 2 also shows how these statements are re-categorised into composed variables representing the three meanings of the supermarket (functional, social and symbolic).

The statements measuring the functional meaning of the supermarket contain an interesting paradox. Although people strongly agree with the statement that having a supermarket in the village to do groceries is important (4.62), not many of them seem to have been really dependent on it for doing their own groceries (2.67) or for its other functions (3.11). Apparently, the functional meaning of the supermarket is perceived as more important for the village than for their own purposes. This same line of reasoning holds for the statements on the social meaning of the supermarket. Many respondents indicate that it is important that a village has a supermarket as a meeting place (4.27), but a considerably lower number of inhabitants deliberately used it for that manner (2.94). So statements that refer to village level meanings of the supermarket have higher average scores, indicating the importance that is ascribed to facilities for other people in the community and the village in general.

A number of statements on the meaning of the supermarket were used in both the 2017 and the 2015 study. As discussed in the methodological section, we can only use the questionnaires that were filled in by the same households in both 2015 and 2017 to compare results. This was the case for 149 respondents. A non-parametric Wilcoxon signed-rank test allows us to verify if the means of the statements changed significantly. In other words, it is possible to verify if the strength of these statements has diminished in due time. The results, interestingly, indicate an opposite pattern. Respondents agreed more strongly to five out of six statements on place meanings of the local supermarket, two years after the closure. For the village, respondents in 2017 more strongly agreed that a village should have a supermarket for its function as a meeting place and for the status and identity of the village. For themselves, respondents agree more strongly to have more positive memories towards the supermarket, to value the SPAR and to have been dependent on it than in 2015. The only statement that our respondents agree less strongly with is, 'It is important that a village has a supermarket in order to do groceries'. Although this statement still has a very high mean score, a number of respondents may have realised that the non-availability of a supermarket led to fewer inconveniences than expected.

TABLE 2 Place meanings of the local supermarket in 2017 ($n = 244$) and comparison of place meanings 2015 and 2017 ($n = 149$)

Meaning/statement ^a	Average ($N = 244$) 2017	Comparison 2015 and 2017 ($N = 149$)		
		2015	2017	<i>P</i> -value ^c
FUNCTIONAL MEANING				
($\alpha = 0.76$) ^b	3.46			
It is important that a village has a supermarket in order to do groceries	4.62	4.772.61	4.64	0.049
I depended on the SPAR to do groceries	2.67	–	2.88	0.006
I depended on the SPAR for its other functions (ATM, medicine pick-up, postal service)	3.11		–	–
SOCIAL MEANING ($\alpha = 0.73$)				
	3.78			
It is important that a village has a supermarket because it is a meeting place	4.27	4.034.13	4.28	0.004
I have positive memories (events or experiences) regarding the SPAR	4.14	–	4.38	0.003
I used the SPAR to meet people	2.94		–	–
SYMBOLIC MEANING ($\alpha = 0.73$)				
	4.14			
It is important that a village has a supermarket for its status/identity	4.48	4.44– 3.96	4.51	0.381
A village without a supermarket is a village without a heart	4.00		–	–
For me the SPAR was a valuable place	3.94		4.07	0.147

^a1 is totally disagree, 5 is totally agree.

^bThe reliability of the composed variables has been statistically tested with a Chronbach's alpha test. An alpha higher than 0.65 indicates that the items combined form a reliable score due to high mutual correlations.

^cResults are based on a non-parametric Wilcoxon signed-rank test. This test has been executed on 149 cases. These are the respondents who filled in the questionnaire in 2015 as well as 2017. *P*-values lower than 0.05 indicate a statistically significant relation.

Place meanings and perceived effects of the closure of the SPAR

By means of multiple linear regression analysis, the multi-item scales representing the three meanings of the supermarket are used as higher-order explanatory variables to explain variance in six perceived effects of the closure of the supermarket. A number of socio-demographic variables are included as control variables.

The descriptive statistics of the perceived effects of the closure of the supermarket show that respondents perceive the effects mostly in neutral and negative terms (1 = increased; 3 = the same; 5 = decreased, first row Table 3). In particular, respondents feel that the village liveability and status have decreased due to the supermarket's closure.

The results of the multiple linear regression analyses show that there is a significant relation between the symbolic meaning of having a supermarket and the perceived effects of the supermarket's disappearance on a village level (Table 3). Respondents who strongly agree with the symbolic meaning of the supermarket state significantly more often that the supermarket's closure

TABLE 3 The role of place meanings in explaining the perceived effects of the loss of the local supermarket

	<i>Effect on village level</i>			<i>Effect on individual level</i>		
	Liveability of Ulrum	Senses of solidarity in Ulrum	Status of Ulrum	Active participation in village life	Value of the house	Travel expenditures for doing grocery shopping
Mean perceived effects of the closure of the supermarket on	4.46	3.77	4.44	3.05	3.88	3.79
Primary meaning	0.09	0.04	0.03	0.09	0.16	0.32*
Social meaning	-0.00	0.12	-0.03	0.02	-0.10	0.15
Symbolic meaning	0.47*	0.34*	0.54*	-0.11	0.18	0.11
Sex (0 = female, 1 = male)	-0.03	0.03	-0.00	-0.05	0.01	0.09
Age category		-0.10				
18–65 years	0.02	-0.23*	-0.14	0.07	0.06	0.06
65–75 years (ref)76+	-0.05		-0.04	-0.01	0.14	-0.04
Education						
Low	-0.05	-0.00	-0.11	0.12	-0.13	-0.12
Medium (ref)High	0.01	0.01	-0.15**	0.06	-0.05	0.02
Length of residence						
0–10 years	0.04	0.11	0.10	0.03	-0.09	0.11
11–30 years (ref)31 years or longer	0.03	0.02	0.04	0.16**	-0.02	0.02
Car ownership (0 = no, 1 = yes)	-0.00	-0.06	0.08	-0.10	0.13	0.13
Visitation frequency SPAR	0.06	0.09	0.04	0.09	0.19**	0.09
Connectedness to Ulrum	-0.08	-0.15**	-0.11	-0.09	0.02	0.11
<i>N</i>	217	215	218	214	201	214
<i>R</i> ²	0.28	0.27	0.27	0.08	0.16	0.32

*Significant on 0.05 level.

**Significant on 0.01 level.

negatively affected the villages' liveability, solidarity and status. There is, however, no significant relation between the symbolic meaning of the supermarket and the perceived effects of its loss on the level of the individual. The symbolic meaning of a village facility should therefore not be underestimated, as it strongly correlates with perceptions of liveability, solidarity and status.

The functional and social meanings do not show strong correlations with most perceived effects. Only people who strongly agree with statements on the primary function of the local supermarket more often state that their travel expenditures for doing grocery shopping have increased.

Finally, an important finding is that the social meaning of a supermarket does not correlate with any perceived effect. This suggests that the social importance of a village supermarket should not be overestimated.

While evaluating the control variables, a number of findings are worthwhile to address. Elderly (compared to their reference group) and residents who feel strongly connected to Ulrum are more likely to report higher levels of village solidarity after the closure of the supermarket. Also, higher educated residents (compared to their reference group) find that the status of Ulrum increased since the SPAR closed. At the same time, residents with a high length of residence (compared to their reference group) state that they became less active in village life since the closure. Finally, people who visited the SPAR frequently believe that the value of their house may have decreased due to its closure.

CONCLUSION

The closure and loss of rural facilities and services often go hand in hand with protests and negative emotional reactions. In literature, it is suggested that such negative feelings have to do with dealing with (place) change. Most models on dealing with place change end when the change is accepted and daily routines are adapted to the new situation (Brown & Perkins, 1992; Devine-Wright, 2009). However, often sentiments of loss seem to last much longer, especially in rural areas. In this article, we wanted to find out how villagers perceived the effect of the loss of the local supermarket, a certain time after this final phase of accepting the loss. We did so by conducting a survey in the village of Ulrum, in the north of The Netherlands, two years after the village had lost its local supermarket. A similar survey was done around the closure in 2015 (Christiaanse & Haartsen, 2017), which allowed for comparison. Besides investigating the perceived effects of the loss of the supermarket for both the village and the residents personally, we also examined how the meanings of the supermarket for the villagers may have changed over time and how they may explain the perceived effects of the loss.

In terms of coping, we found that our respondents all found alternative supermarkets close by. Ulrum seems to fit in the lively local society category of Egelund and Laustsen (2006). With regard to place meanings of the local supermarket, the results show that two years after the closure, people still strongly agree with the social and symbolic meanings of having a local supermarket. People feel that a village should have a supermarket for the status of the village and as a beating heart. When comparing the place meanings of the supermarket around closure in 2015 and two years later, we see several interesting results. First, most place meanings of the local supermarket are still strongly agreed with, and for the majority, this agreement even increased. Village-level meanings still have the highest average scores (to do groceries, for the status of the village, as a social meeting place, respectively), but individual meanings have increased more strongly. We also found that the supermarket as a meeting place is the only village-level meaning that is considered significantly more important, two years later. So respondents seem to miss the indirect social contacts and chats one can have when doing groceries. This corresponds with the insights of Amcoff et al. (2011) that the local village shop was mostly missed as a centre of information dissemination.

With regard to the perceived effects of the loss of the local supermarket on the liveability of the village, senses of solidarity, the status of Ulrum, the active participation of villagers in community life, the value of their house and the (travel) expenditures for grocery shopping, we found the following pattern. Respondents who strongly emphasise the symbolic meaning

of a supermarket believe that the liveability, solidarity and status of the village decreased. This relation was not found with perceived effects at the individual level. In other words, symbolic meanings of the supermarket hardly affect day-by-day aspects for most villagers but do explain some of the variations of perceived effects on a village level. Interestingly, the social meanings of the supermarket do not significantly relate to the perceived effects of the loss of the supermarket. So the social meeting place meanings of the SPAR are highly valued and have increased over time after the actual loss, but they do not explain the perceived effects of the loss.

This article intended to explore if perceived effects of loss of village facilities and services can be better explained by looking beyond the place change models that end at accepting (or opposing) the change. We found that two years after the closure of the local supermarket, people have adapted their daily routines to the new situation but still perceive the effects of the loss. These mainly relate to the symbolic and village-level meanings of the supermarket. Individual meanings of the supermarket are less important but have increased over the two years after closure. Both results seem to hint towards nostalgic sentiments around (the loss of) facilities and services: A longing for a past situation that no longer exists. It is not clear if these nostalgic sentiments function as a way of overcoming the loss or if villagers actually would like to restore the 'old' situation in order to improve the status of the village and to re-create a beating heart. Future research could try to explore this further. It is also possible that citizens create new forms of 'beating hearts' in villages, by means of citizen initiatives that may not copy or replace the old facilities. It could be interesting to find out which place meanings play a role in such new initiatives. Given that we already found changes in the place meanings of the local supermarket after two years, another survey after five or ten years may add to our knowledge of how people deal with place change and how senses of loss can be explained. The symbolic function of facilities should not be overlooked in explaining the perceived effects of loss, and it seems that in order to keep villages liveable, they may need facilities and services to derive status and pride from. Policymakers are therefore recommended to be aware of the symbolic function that village facilities may have. Focusing on finding new tangible symbols that address village viability and status might therefore take away some of the dissatisfaction caused by the loss of facilities.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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