Business Administration: Master Thesis

Process research: how multiple perspectives contribute to an organizational identity

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16-5-2018

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Abstract

Identity is problematic and the dynamics of identity need to be better understood. But when examining developments in organizational identity usually the why-question is asked. The how-question is underexposed in literature on the topic of organizational identity. The objective of this research is to give a comprehensible clarification of the process that precedes a development in identity. This paper explains what social mechanisms contribute to the composition of an organizational identity on the basis of a case study.

The student organization of VGS-Nederland has been examined to find out from which perspectives identity is determined and how they contribute to it. The two perspectives that contribute to an organizational identity according to current literature have been examined to what extent they determined the identity of VGS-Nederland. But this could not explain the developments in identity fully, therefore two new perspectives have been found that contributed to the identity of VGS-Nederland.

Semi-structured interviews have been conducted to create an image of determining identity in the last 25 years. The interviews and archival data resulted in these four perspectives that can be used for a better understanding of the composition of an organizational identity. Analyses and clustering of second order themes explain what social mechanisms are responsible for shifts in organizational identity. This knowledge improves current academic literature with two newly added perspectives that contribute to an organizational identity and should not be ignored in managing organizations.

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Every organization has its own identity. It is probably an identity that fits the members of the organization, but it keeps on developing, along with the world around the organization and its members. This ´development of identity´ is essential in this thesis, because it is never as static as it appears to be. In this process research identity is viewed as ´how we are becoming´. With this view we acknowledge the fact that a current identity is for this moment and not definitive. Members are continuously influencing this identity; this takes place by certain members, in certain places in the organization, helped by certain social mechanisms. It is an interesting quest to find out who determined this identity as it is en who keeps contributing to the developments in the organizational identity.

Developments in identity can be an issue in organizations, especially when they are undesired. There are organizations that have to deal with a lot of change in management and the policies they bring along, other organizations have to deal with a fast renewal of members who have to adopt the organizations identity. An organization that is aware of both mentioned problems is a student organization; every year a new board and the turnover time of members is only the length of a student life. Maintaining identity is their core business. This research examines ten student organizations, which belong to the same overarching association. These student organizations are especially interesting because of the extra aspect of communicating and maintaining their religious identity for more than fifty years and even better: they come from an ortho-dox-protestant pillar that was entirely established to maintain identity. To freshen up your

mind on the topic of Dutch history: when the pillars of the 'Dutch Pillarization' were torn down, new pillars arose in protestant-orthodox part of society. These pillars founded their own organizations to make sure the identity of their social group could be maintained. But, even though the newly arisen pillars have not disappeared entirely nowadays, they could not sustain in the modern environment. The weakening of the pillars led to continuous adjustment of identities in originally strongly pillarized organizations. This applies not only to protestant organization, but also to organizations of liberal, social and catholic pillar (e.g. VARA public broadcast, de Volkskrant, CDA, Radboud Universiteit, FNV trade union, etc.).

1.2 Scope

VGS-Nederland is an overarching organization of ten student organizations in different university cities in the Netherlands. Just over 750 people are member of these organizations (October 2017). Historically these student associations are established in the context of a protestants-orthodox mini-pillar: over 90% of the members come from this protestants-orthodox denomination (Gereformeerde Kerken vrijgemaakt, 119,406 members in 2016). Although the degree of pillarization is decreasing some pillars are still there (Van Bekkum, 2004). We can consider VGS-Nederland as one of the last relics of the Dutch pillarization. Over the years many pillarized institutions have vanished and the institutions that are still around recognize a decrease in membership and involvement. The memberships of VGS-Nederland decreased over 20% in the last seven years. If this trend would continue there is no VGS-Nederland anymore in a decade and that would be a shame: the student associations that will be examined have a rich history which spans more than a half century, the more the reason worth saving it. (Kruizinga, 2008) As being the concerned researcher I am above average involved with the organization. This brings the benefits of easy access, years of naturalistic observation and being familiar with the slightly particular history. It also implies I derive my identity from the identity of the organization. This entails a personal motivation to investigate a changing identity, but could entail a slightly biased perspective and a prejudiced attitude. The risks of an active role ('going native') are taken into account and avoided where possible by continuously referring to what data (interviewees and documents) have indicated. (Bryman & Bell, 2015)

1.3 Organizational history

In the 20th century the Dutch society became segregated in groups of beliefs; socialists, liberals, Catholics and Protestants: pillarization. Halfway through last century the organizations started to 'depillarize'. Orthodox-protestants who appreciated their own pillar were cautious for the integration with other social groups and the forthcoming loss of identity. Therefore they did not agree with this development and started new mini-pillars (Hippe & Lucardie, 2016): for that reason the student associations were founded. In the context of a strong pillar more than half a century ago, the student associations of VGS-Nederland maintained itself against a more serene background. Nowadays the background is not serene anymore: the contextual developments caused a more integrated society, whereby pillarization has become redundant and unwanted. (Massink, 1993) Therefore a student association founded on the pillars of pillarization needs to adjust its identity to overcome the problem of being redundant. The entire reason the student

associations were founded was to protect the own identity and that is exactly the issue when it comes to protecting an identity nowadays (Hippe & Lucardie, 2016).

The problem in current society comes partially to surface in the 'G' of 'VGS', which describes the mini-pillar of VGS-Nederland: 'gereformeerd'. This word has an image problem in the Dutch society. It evokes associations with small-minded, overly regulated behavior. (Van Bekkum, 2004) This problem is around for more than decades, but nowadays it is urgent enough that current members started claiming VGS-Nederland will not be around anymore in ten years, because of this. The downsizing of the number of members is one part of the problem, but a second even bigger problem is that members do not realize any longer where their student association stands for and what makes its identity unique (Roel Kuiper in the 'Nederlands Dagblad', 26-09-2016). Members do not recognize any longer the importance of their membership and how valuable it can be for the rest of their lives; the skills they develop, how they broaden their areas of expertise, how they build upon friendships and how they learn to make choices in life wisely. The above mentioned newspaper article is also the direct cause for the reflection on identity for VGS-Nederland. There were already internal struggles, but the fact that someone outside of the organization publicly called the identity of VGS-Nederland weak triggered the path of reflection.

1.4 Aim

Organizational control usually starts out with performance instead of identity. Organizational identity is in general not an issue in the context of organizational control. This research tries to make organizational identity urgent again. The aim of this research is to map the process of development in organizational identity. Diagnosing the process and understanding the developments create an opportunity to control organizational identity. It offers the possibility to maintain an identity that is valued or to make a shift in organizational identity when desired. In this case it offers these possibilities in particular for the student organizations of VGS-Nederland. To overcome problems in identity it is desired to improve knowledge on the formation of VGS-Nederland's organizational identity.

1.5 Literature gap

Academic literature provides many books and articles on identity and identity change. But there are gaps in our knowledge on organizational identity. DeRue & Ashford (2010) recommend to look into informal structures in identity: "*In addition, although we highlight formal institutional structures as an important antecedent, we encourage scholars to extend our theory by also considering the impact of informal structures.*" (DeRue & Ashford, 2010, p. 642) Management theories are inclined to assume that everything that is not top-down is out of the control of the management, therefore everything should regulated from the top, but I would demonstrate that seemingly unregulated interaction can be managed. "*All that stuff you have been dismissing for so long as intractable, irrational, intuitive, informal organization can be managed.*" (Peters and Waterman, 1982, p. 11)

Many articles and books have been written on the topic of 'why organizational identities change over time', but there is a lack of understanding on 'how this organizational change occurs'. "*…it is because identity is problematic – and yet so critical to how and what one values,*

thinks, feels and does in all social domains, including organizations – that the dynamics of identity need to be better understood." (Albert et al., 2000, p. 14)

The determination of organizational identity is a topic researchers have written about. Usually organizations have been examined by current literature in the context of defining how identity was determined in these organizations, but it does only explain the determination of identity to the extent of the two existing perspectives: claims and understandings. But I believe this does not explain the determination of organizational identity sufficiently. Therefore I will extent the theory on identity determination by creating more perspectives that determine the identity of an organization.

2. Literature

2.1 Organizational identity as a process

To make any claims on identity it is important to understand how identity is framed in generally accepted academic literature. Albert & Whetten defined organizational identity in 1985 as "that which is most central, enduring and distinctive about an organization" (p. 263). Over the years this definition became generally accepted. That what is most central and distinctive aspect, that what makes the organization unique, defines an identity. This claim for uniqueness is critical for the existence of an organization, because if there is nothing that makes the organization unique, there would not be a right to exist.

Therefore it is urgent to give attention to this unique identity. Maintaining an identity should be on the agenda of leaders of an organization. If identity is not actively maintained, there is an extreme risk of a slow unintentional change in identity (Ravasi & Philips, 2011). In other words: the true and unique identity might slip away and this slipping causes unknowns. "Change is challenging. With any organizational change come unknowns. With unknowns come ambiguities. When those ambiguities concern the identity of the organization itself, it becomes difficult for members to make sense of who we are as an organization." (Gioia & Corley, 2004: p. 173) Unintentional change in organizational identity is not only undesirable, because of its negative effects for the strength of the organization, but also because of its ambiguities. As a result the members' perception of the organizational identity starts to diverge.

From this divergence it becomes clear that not every single person has to have the same view on the identity of an organization. Even better: "An organizational identity does not exist in a fixed and absolute sense: the salience of various attributes is a function of the context in which comparisons are made." (Turner et al., 1994, p. 254) But when identity is not monitored and guarded people will receive different perceptions of the true identity. This ambiguity leads to decrease in the 'greatest common divisor': the relationship of feeling connected to the organization is becoming weak, which can be interpreted as a decrease in collective identity.

Relevant in overcoming this problem of an ambiguous identity is determining the identity. But the earlier mentioned definition of Albert & Whetten does not tell us who determines the unique and most central parts of identity. It does not define who makes this claim for uniqueness; it can be made by the leaders of the organization, but can also be a consensual claim of the members of the organization (Gioia et al., 2000). In the case of an identity claim of the top

of the organization the identity will be probably quite static, but in the case of a consensus on identity by members the identity it is very likely the identity is dynamic, it is subject to continuous adjustment to the current environment. This dynamism is the case when viewing identity as a process, because identity is continuously being adjusted through processes of social construction (e.g. claim, negotiate, challenge, repair, etc.). From a top-down identity claim the organization has to ask itself the question 'who we are', where identity as a process deals with the question 'how we are becoming' (Schultz et al., 2011). The word 'becoming' is very important, because it shows identity as something that is not definitive. It is continuously subject to change due to contextual factors and interaction. Identity viewed as a process acknowledges the fact that identity is always an identity historically situated in a specific point in space and time. (Maguire and Hardy, 2015)
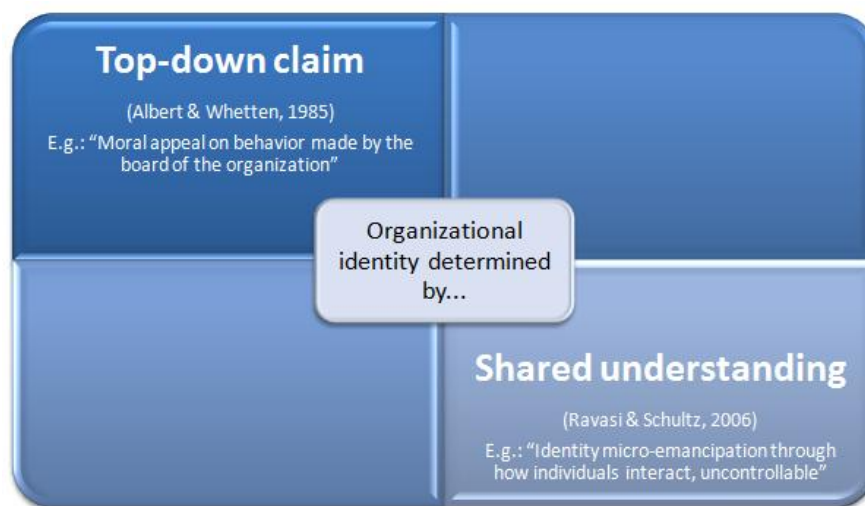

Figure 1: perspectives on determining identity according to current literature

2.2 Current perspectives: top-down claim & shared understanding

When we agree upon viewing identity as a process we can examine how this process takes place. We want to know how an organizations' identity is formed or how an ambiguous identity is being created. Academic scholars have always been interested in the question how identity is formed, because identity is problematic and the dynamics of identity should be better understood. (Albert et al., 2000) There are two main perspectives on organizational identity apparent in literature. In the first perspective identity is available to members as an institutionalized claim and the second perspective views identity as a shared understanding amongst members. (Faber, 2012)

Top-down claim

The perspective of the institutionalized claim is considered as deterministic and top-down, facilitated by the formal role of management. (Mujib, 2017) But some scholars are questioning the traditional conceptualization which positions this leadership as top-down and hierarchical. (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) According to Alvesson & Willmott (2002) this purely formal view is due to a functionalist form of organizational analysis, which is preoccupied with formal control.

It assumes that management operations are completely understood and the result can be dedi-cated to the execution of the top of the organization. "It is assumed that control is achieved by designing and applying appropriate structures, procedures, measures and targets; and, related-ly, that resistance to these mechanisms is symptomatic of 'poor design' or 'poor management' that can be rectified by restructuring and/or training or staff replacement." (Alvesson & Willmott, 2000, p. 621) The term 'institutionalized claim' can be confusing when it is interpret-ed as a claim that is expressed by all members of the institution. Therefore, to avoid confusion and to come to a more logical dichotomy, the term 'top-down claim' is used. This perspective is defined as an (in)explicit claim concerning organizational identity facilitated by the formal man-agement of the organization.

Shared understanding

However the perspective of identity as a shared understanding considers it to be informal and bottom-up, putting employees central and let organizational identity form through social inter-action. (Bartel & Dutton, 2001; Mujib, 2017) This is reflected in the idea of sense making of both perspectives. According to Faber (2012) top-down identity claims are "organizational self-definitions proposed by organizational leaders, providing members with a consistent and legit-imate narrative to construct a collective sense of self." (Faber, 2012, p. 63) Through the claims of the leaders sense is given to the members, which will determine their collective, organiza-tional identity. But the perspective of shared understanding does not assume this top-down gift of identity, the perspective of shared understanding assumes that members make sense of their collective, organizational identity by social interaction among members that will result in a shared understanding which determines the identity of the organization. These shared under-standings are continuously renegotiated by members. (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006) Important note is that 'shared understanding' is not a synonym for 'bottom-up', because 'bottom-up' indicates that there is still a form of control where identity needs to be agreed upon and brought back to the top for approval; this is not the case for 'shared understanding'. It just is and does not need approval or formal documented consensus. The perspective of shared understanding is defined as members coming to a mutual consensus concerning their organizational identity without interfering or guidance by others except for each other, whereby the individuals (non)verbally communicate on an equal basis.

Perspectives combined

Two perspectives that can determine the organizational identity are described. Usually one per-spective should be used as point-of-view to examine an identity. But in the case of organiza-tional identity both perspectives can be real in the everyday life of an organization. (Faber, 2012) And because both perspectives are present in reality, theoretical understanding of an identity should comprehend both aspects. (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) The explanation of or-ganizational identity cannot be sufficient if we exclude one perspective. When we assume the perspective of the institutionalized claim as complete explanation for organizational identity we lay the entire responsibility for the identity on the functional execution of the management. It is unlikely people will objectively go along, because of their subjectively free will to accept or not accept institutionalized claims. But when we assume the perspective of shared understand-ing as complete explanation for organizational identity we expect that this identity is complete-ly uncontrollable and in the hands of the members that mutually constitute an identity. This

also seems unlikely and no representation of reality, because members are usually not indifferent towards claims from the top, mostly because there is a certain power structure in every organization. The only control there is left, assuming the perspective of ´shared understanding´, is the control one individual has being a part of all individuals that constitute the collective identity. Both explanations seem to be inadequate to understand an organizational identity completely. Therefore it cannot be this black or white; it has to be an interaction between multiple perspectives: "They [the two perspectives] create a dynamic whereby the claims may influence the shared understandings, but the latter may on its turn also (re)construct or revise the formal claims." (Faber, 2012. p. 76)

Figure 2: perspectives on determining identity

2.3 Bridging the two views: shared claim & top-down understanding

The two perspectives described give an explanation for how an organization comes to its identity. But there is more to it that can be framed, to come to a better explanation of identity. Using the two perspectives from current literature there are some difficulties in allocating social mechanisms to one or the other perspective. In particular social mechanism that are present in the informal circuit in organizations. For example the social mechanism of social control: it does not completely fit the perspective of shared understanding because social control withholds a claim to a certain extent, but it does not fit a top-down claim either, because the claim comes from every single member. Another example would be the social mechanism of coming to a shared consensus between unequal individuals in the organization; it does not fit one or the other. The knowledge of the functioning of these social mechanisms is a result of the interviews and is formed through 'grounded theory' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), not by only examining the current literature on identity. Both mentioned examples of social mechanisms were recognized through the interviews, but do not fit the current perspectives; a problem that is solved by adding the following perspectives.

Shared claim

Foucault (1975) does specify some more on how identity can be construed, which will lead to the first new perspective I will add. He explains how the institutional claims can come from the

entire organization; that what is normally proposed by organizational leaders does not necessarily have to be a message from the organizational leader according to Foucault. (Mujib, 2017) The idea of the 'panopticon', where everyone knows they are being controlled by everyone, shapes individuals behavior. (Digeser, 1992) Therefore every member of the institute can be part of making the institutionalized claims, contrary to a perspective where claims are only linked to the top of the organization. According to O'Reilly & Chatman (1996) social control is even a more powerful form of control in modern organizations than traditional formal control. People have the urge to show appropriate behavior around the ones whose opinion matters to us, therefore a claim concerning our behavior will have its effects. This claim does not necessarily have to come from the one who pays your salary. It will also have its effects when the claim is being made by another person whose opinion matters to us. From now on I will refer to the idea of the 'panopticon' as the perspective of the 'shared claim' which is defined as an (in)explicit claim concerning organizational identity facilitated by the majority of members.

Top-down understanding

This first new perspective of the 'shared claim' explains how an identity claim does not necessarily have to be initiated by the leaders of the organization. The following newly added perspective explains how forming identity does not necessarily have to be a claim. Usually leaders are presented as one-directional and static, but this does not necessarily have to be. Existing literature lacks theorizing leadership roles as a mutual influence process among individuals. (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) Leadership roles are not only static, one-directional and formal, but can also consist of conversations on an equal base. Therefore even though leaders are in the position to claim a certain organizational identity they do not have to make this claim. It is even more effective to come to a shared understanding between a leader and a follower. Outcalt et al. (2000) describes how non-hierarchical leadership can work through inspirational leadership; charismatic leaders display exemplary behavior, communicate confidence to followers and provide a vision. This charismatic informal leadership contributes to the organizational identity through consensus between individuals instead of a claim. From now on I will refer to this as the perspective of 'top-down understanding' which is defined as members coming to a mutual consensus concerning their organizational identity without interfering or guidance by others except for each other, whereby individuals (non)verbally communicate on an unequal base.

Logical dichotomies

Now we have four different perspectives that are able to contribute to an identity to a certain extent: 'top-down claims', 'shared understanding', 'shared claims' and 'top-down understanding'. The literature only refers to 'shared understanding' and 'institutionalized claims'. The word 'institutionalized' has been replaced by 'top-down' to create a logical dichotomy between 'shared understanding' and 'top-down understanding'. 'Institutionalized understanding' would be confusing and would not justify its content, therefore it is not used. Next to this 'institutionalized claims' would be confusing, because academic literature usually refers to it as claims by the top of the organization, but 'institutionalized' could also be interpreted as 'social control'; a claim from the total institution.

The four mentioned perspectives are the ones that will be referred to in this paper. On the basis of these four perspectives this research tries to understand the determination of an identity in a more complete form.

2.4 Social mechanisms contributing to organizational identity

The relevance of organizational identity has been clarified including the perspectives that determine this identity. But this does not practically occur in the everyday life of an organization. What occurs are the social mechanisms that can be allocated to the perspectives. These forms of social interaction are able to truly influence the identity of an organization. The relevant social mechanisms will be explained.

Example roles

A mechanism for affecting identity can be through mirroring, that is the claim of Dutton & Dukerich (1991). Their research found out how people adjusted their own identity to the organizational identity when they became aware of a discrepancy between the own identity and the identity of the organization. Hatch & Schultz (2002) argue that mirroring has even "more profound implications for organizational identity dynamics than is implied by Dutton and Dukerich's discrepancy analysis". (Hatch & Schultz, 2002, p. 999) They claim that people are not only trying to live up to the identity of the own organization but also to the external stakeholders of the organization. The images the stakeholders hold of the organization are the mirror and the members try to adjust their identity to a perfect external image; the example role. Summarizing: members of an organization will try to live up to the, what they see as, most appreciated image of the organization. And this mirror is also part of the identity process; it is not static, but subject to change; if the mirror changes, the organization changes along with it. At the same time; if an organization is able to control the mirror it is able to contribute to its collective identity.

Enthusiasts

Another interesting and recurring mechanism for creating developments in an identity is the small group of lobbyists that are needed to convince an entire organization. The literature on organizational identity already concluded that identity is not only determined by a top-down claim, but by also by a shared understanding. However, there has not been conducted any research on how this social aggregate works. It is questionable if every member has the same voice in this social aggregate. Maybe some people on the right place determine the identity of the entire organization.

Social control

People care about what someone else would think of our behavior. This motivates us to show behavior that is desired by others. Desired behavior contains among other adjusting and following the existing identity of the organization. Simply feeling the presence of others makes us already showing desired behavior, therefore more interaction with other members of the same organization leads to a higher form of social control.

Uncontrollable factors

The greatest influencers for identity are the uncontrollable factors. For example society or organizations from the same sector can influence members and encourage these members to change this in their organization. For example a government or another important stakeholder takes a decision that changes the rules for the organization. This is an example of how external forces do not influence the attitude through shaping new ideas by members, but directly influ-

encing the goings, including identity, of the organization. A couple of social mechanisms have been highlighted to set an image of the uncontrollability:

Renewal of members

Organizations exist of a never ending cycle of renewing of members. It is relevant for the organization to keep explaining the identity, because new members need to adopt it to hold on to the current identity. But the renewal of members as a social mechanisms means that there is a continuous flow of incoming people who are not aware of the organizational identity. If these people do not know what the desired behavior is they will fill in the gaps by their own behavior.

Diminishing devotion to organizations

One external development in particular is of influence towards organizational identity: people nowadays are not that involved in organizations as they were a couple of decades ago. An ongoing trend of diminishing devotion towards organizations is visible according to the 'Sociaal & Cultureel Planbureau'. (De Hart, 1999) The Dutch society used to be divided into a couple of pillars. It was not uncommon when people dedicated their lives to the organizations of their pillar. Today there are not many people dedicated to a certain group, therefore they can follow their own goals instead of group goals. Long-term planning is no longer common; activism on project base is acceptable, activism with lifetime dedication is unimaginable. (De Hart, 1999)

Inevitable change

It may seem like the above mentioned social mechanisms of organizational control could add up to a mechanism for controlling identity when it is executed and controlled perfectly. But this is not the case. It is a step in the right direction to be aware of identity controlling mechanisms, but it is not a formula for success. The dialogical phenomena cannot be fully captured and therefore it is reasonable to leave room for unexpected changes: "Managers should learn to expect surprise and see it as an opportunity rather than as an indication of poor control." (Plowman et al., 2007, p. 540)

Shotter & Billig blame our urge for control in the context where we try to bring everything into social frameworks. "It is the urge toward both mastery and control implicit in all our current methodologies that leads us to banish particularized perceptions by ordering them into comprehensible and 'meaningful' regularities." (Shotter & Billig, 1998, p. 27)

But the process of organizational identity is not completely incomprehensible and does not take place uncontrollably; to some extent we are able to understand, and therewith control, the process organizational identity follows. This paper will try to understand the process on the basis of the following research question.

3. Research question

Identity stays problematic and difficult to understand completely. The organizations of VGS-Nederland experienced this problem of identity in reality. This led to the appeal for a strong identity coming from Roel Kuiper as mentioned in the introduction. To solve a weak identity it is relevant to find out the dynamics of identity; how does the process of identity develop? This research will add another part of the puzzle of identity by extending the perspectives of how identity can be determined. When these identity influencers are discovered and mapped, more

knowhow will arise for the organizations' management team to put the focus on the right identity determination factors when they desire a development in identity.

To map the process of identity development the following questions have been examined:

Process research: how multiple perspectives contribute to an organizational identity.

What perspectives on determining identity contributed to the construction of the current organizational identity of VGS-Nederland and how did social mechanisms determine this process?

This is an attempt to recognize how identity developed within the organization of VGS-Nederland by examining how its identity was determined through multiple perspectives. This question can be divided into sub questions that will lead to the answer of the research question. The sub questions will serve as structure through this research. The first two sub questions will discuss the presence of the four perspectives and if they contributed to the organizational identity. The third sub question will examine how these perspectives become visible in the form of social mechanisms that truly determine the organizational identity.

S1. Organizational identity is determined by top-down claims and shared understanding. How did both perspectives appear within VGS-Nederland and how do they cooperate?

S2. Social interaction processes that determine organizational identity can also be based on a 'shared claim' or a 'top-down understanding'. How did these two perspectives for determining organizational identity appear within VGS-Nederland?

S3. What social mechanisms determined the identity of VGS-Nederland and to what perspective for determining identity can they be assigned to?

The first question is to explore how top-down claims and shared understanding had its impact on the development of the VGS-Nederland organizations. The literature has indicated that both perspectives are present in the everyday life of organization and both do partially explain the identity, but how do the perspectives come forward in determining the identity of VGS-Nederland, according to the interviewees. Every interviewee has spilled their mind on the subject of determining identity: top-down claim or shared understanding?

In the second question there will be examined if and how the two newly added perspectives partially determined the identity of VGS-Nederland. Were the claims on identity only made from the top of the organization or did they come from all individuals of the organization? And is the shared understanding of identity only possible between equal individuals or can a consensus also being reached between top and bottom of an organization? With the help of quotes from I will explain how these new perspectives had its impact in determining the identity of VGS-Nederland.

The third question is there to examine VGS-Nederland in the context of not only recognizing the existence and presence of the four perspectives, but to find out to what extent which perspectives had its impact. This sub question will explain how the four perspectives came forward in the everyday developments in the identity of VGS-Nederland. Along, by interviewees indicated as, major developments in identity will be explained how the process of determining organiza-

tional identity developed. The description of the process will tell us more about where, how and by whom an organizational identity is constructed. This leads eventually to a couple of social mechanisms that can be seen as engines for the development of organizational identity.

4. Research methods

4.1 Process research, case study & grounded theory

4.1.1 Process research theory

To understand the development of an identity throughout a certain period researches can use process research theory. This method deals with processes of motivation and tries to find out how motivation occurs; to penetrate the logic behind observed temporal progressions (Tsoukas and Hatch, 2001). "In general terms, a variance theory explains change in terms of relationships among independent variables and dependent variables, while a process theory explains how a sequence of events leads to some outcome." (Poole & Van de Ven, 2004, p. 10) In this research there will not be a variable A that will explain variable B, because there is so much more beneath the surface that cannot be explained by variance theory. Where variance theory is able to explain a couple of relationships between variables and the strengths of these relationships, process theory is able to explain more complex matters in a more complete way than combining variables. On the other hand process research is extremely labor-intensive, this limits for that reason the number of cases. (Poole et al., 2000)

Process research for examining organizational identity can be carried out with different research designs. The concept of identity can be viewed as evolution, as narrative, as activity and as witness. (Fachin & Langley, 2017) Process as evolution carries out a longitudinal case study with data from multiple sources to find out how an entity develops over time, process as narrative tries to examine how people make sense of an identity by listening to a narrative, process as activity puts the finger on how people negotiate understandings, process as witness tries to understand how understandings are lived forward. This paper fits the concepts of process as evolution and as narrative best; as evolution because of its description of an identity developing over 25 years and as narrative because of the interviews to find out how members made sense of their organizational identity. The limitations that should be taken into account because of these concepts of process research are the problem of monologues that are limited in their perspective and the problem of not examining any interaction that determines identity. (Fachin & Langley, 2017)

4.1.2 Case study

In this study empirical data is collected in the context of understanding identity shifts in a single case. "Case study design is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. The interest is in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation." (Merriam, 1998) The aim is to find out, through interviews and archival data, where we can find the social mechanisms that function as determining factors in constructing organizational identity. By examining the internal shifts in organizational identity the decisive social mechanisms come to surface. There will

be taken a closer look at the theoretical social mechanisms and observe their functioning and mutual interaction in the case study.

4.1.3 Grounded theory

To be able to explain complex causes for change in identity a qualitative research approach is used: grounded theory. This approach is a combination of inductivism and deductivism; a cycle of data gathering, data analysis and reflection. This research starts with a small assumption of how identity develops over time, but when new data from archives and newspapers is gathered a better concept can be realized. This concept leads to questions for a semi-structured interview which is being improved after every interview. Afterwards the findings from the interviews are being tested according to the literature and the literature might be confirmed by new data. (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) It is essential to continuously make the comparison between data and conceptualization. Everything that is being coded needs to be reviewed to look for new conceptual theories. (Bryman & Bell, 2015) In this case there is room for returning to data from archives; annual reports, history bundles, archived nation-wide meetings, newspaper articles and a couple of books concerned with the theme.

4.2 Data collection

This research uses multiple methods for data collection; literature review, semi-structured interviews, archival data from the organization, secondary resources such as books and newspaper archives and the researchers' naturalistic observation also has its influence.

4.2.1 Semi-structured interviews

The most important method to break down mechanisms beneath the surface is 'in-depth interviews'. How the processes of development in identity took place, will be figured out by interviewing certain alumni. What was necessary to maintain the identity? What developments did they experience? How was the identity controlled? What events did they regard as responsible for change?

According to Jasper Klapwijk (2006) the 'reformed identity' started to be unchained in the early 90's. The pillar started to crumble from that moment on. Therefore the alumni being interviewed are among the members of the period from the early 90's until now. The alumni needed for this are the ones that were at the time particularly involved with their student association and have a certain view on how it shaped them as a person and made sense to their own identity. The interviewees studied during different periods of time and these periods can be connected to show development in identity over time.

In-depth interviews are essential to find underlying assumptions from the members. Using in-depth interviews complex structures can come to surface. The interviews took place in all different cities and settings in the Netherlands. As researcher I have visited the interviewees at home. Next to the prominent members and old-members who could be interviewed there is an professional organization involved with VGS-Nederland: International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES). Discussion with the director of this organization was arranged. Fourteen different people were interviewed for approximately slightly more than one hour to examine development in identity over time.

Interviewees were selected on basis of former interest in their associations and its identity and were found through the networks of the current members and through use of the databases of the associations or records from of the archives, they were primarily contacted through LinkedIn. Most interviewees were found through the networks of other interviewees; snowball sampling. As mentioned they should have started studying after 1990 and to exclude members that are inexperienced this is limited to 2012, only these people have enough experience in being a member in a time of a changing identity. Interviewing approximately fifteen people is sufficient to cover all associations and time eras.

The group of interviewees turned out to be a group of primarily former board members who were quite involved with the identity of their organization. Their study period was on average approximately seven years through which the interviewees were able to reflect on their student organization, because of their prolonged membership.

With the variability in study eras it is possible to explain differences in identity in different eras of membership and it shows when people truly identified with the organizations´ identity. Afterwards the results were validated by the interviewees. Some of them took the opportunity to respond to the results, this feedback has been taken into account in the results.

4.2.2 Archival data

Next to the semi-structured interviews there are records of meetings between delegations of the different cities which take place six times a year. These have been archived since 2004, which contain a lot of interesting quotes that, compared to the current meetings, can explain partially the development in identity. The relevant quotes from these meetings will be coded into the same categories as the interviews. Next to the meetings there are annual reports and history bundles that contain reflective thoughts on identity. The findings from this archival data can be used as triangulation, where findings from these resources can confirm the findings of the interviews that are seen as clue.

4.2.3 Secondary resources

Besides the interviews and archival data there is a lot of data extracted from secondary resources. In the interest of the research three books, on how the student associations of VGS-Nederland operated a decade ago, have been consulted; 'Toekomst voor de gereformeerde traditie' by Koert van Bekkum, 'Tussen hoofd en hart' by Renske Kruizinga and 'Op de grens, over student, kerk en maatschappij' by Teun Klapwijk. Besides these books there is a newspaper, the 'Nederlands Dagblad', who has been really involved with the student associations of VGS-Nederland; this newspaper has an archive of half a century which might show how the identity evolved through the decades.

4.2.4 Naturalistic observation

As researcher I have been involved in the organization of VGS-Nederland for many years. This brings a lot of preliminary knowledge, but it also leads to easy access in a peculiar world of protestant-orthodox organizations. To examine an organization starting from the outside there would have been a lot of boundaries.

4.3 Coding

The interviewees will indicate processes responsible for to identity development. Their answers will be coded into the different perspectives that contributed to the identity of VGS-Nederland.

The topic of identity is quite underexposed in the current literature; therefore this is an explorative research. No useful framework is there to code changes in student organizations, for this reason a new framework of labeling have used. By coding the interviews into smaller pieces opportunities arise for discovering recurring perspectives that are responsible for organizational identity. Second there will be made another distinction for the coding process, which are the recurring social mechanisms that can be allocated to the perspectives.

The 1st order concepts, the quotes that are extracted from the interviews for further examination, will be reduced to 2nd order themes (short description of the quote to easily categorize the quote) where after they will be classified to their perspectives; the aggregate dimensions. (Gioia et al., 1994) The analysis started with finding the quotes worth coding if they were assessed as a relevant for the organizational context. These 1st order concepts were reduced into small comparable parts: 2nd order themes. The common recurring themes make up clusters that capture the phenomenon of social mechanisms that contribute to identity. (Saldana, 2009) Using the 2nd order themes the quotes were clustered for their perspectives and social mechanisms.

The classification of the 2nd order themes towards the perspectives is carried out by taking into account the definitions of the four perspectives. 'Top-down claims' is defined as an (in)explicit claim concerning organizational identity facilitated by the formal management of the organization. 'Shared understanding' is defined as members coming to a mutual consensus concerning their organizational identity without interfering or guidance by others except for each other, whereby the individuals (non)verbally communicate on an equal basis. 'Shared claim' is defined as an (in)explicit claim concerning organizational identity facilitated by the majority of members. And 'top-down understanding' is defined as members coming to a mutual consensus concerning their organizational identity without interfering or guidance by others except for each other, whereby individuals (non)verbally communicate on an unequal base. For every story that has to do with determining identity it is important to figure out according to the coding this coding scheme if identity in this case was determined by an (in)explicit claim or that members came to a consensus. If the story of the interviewee indicates a claim it is important to assess if this claim was explicitly made by the formal management or this claim was inexplicitly expressed by the majority of members. If the story of the interviewee indicates a contribution by identity through (non)verbal communication there must be assessed if this consensus was reached by individuals that (non)verbally communicate on an unequal base or by individuals that (non)verbally communicate on an equal base.

4.4 Reliability & Validity

4.4.1 Reliability

Quite some interviews have been conducted to create a reliable picture of the identity of VGS-Nederland organizations throughout the last 25 years. It was a conscious decision to interview at least one person from every VGS-Nederland to cover possible geographical differences in the organization. The study periods of the interviewees were properly distributed over the last 25 years. But there are some downsides concerning the sampling of interviewees too. All interviewees were quite involved in their organization, what could have caused a homogenous view.

Interviewing small groups from the different cities could have given a more complete view, but data resources were not sufficient to arrange this.

4.4.2 Validity

The interviewees were informed about the subject of developments in the identity of their student organization, but it was still difficult for them to pinpoint all relevant developments they have experienced. For some of them these experiences were almost two decades ago. It would be comprehensible if they were not able to outline a perfect representation of the situation. But they were all able to mention some relevant developments in the identity of their organization and it is likely they remembered the most relevant developments.

5. Results

5.1 Top-down claims in relation to shared understanding

How did top-down claims and shared understanding construct an organizational identity through different moments in time? Interviewees had to answer this question according to their own experiences. Therefore it is just an attempt to capture their experience in words. The interviewed people answer this question ambiguously: some of them indicate how the identity of the organization was determined primarily by a top-down institutionalized claim and others indicate that the members came to a mutual consensus concerning identity, where some of them even mentioned the randomness of how this mutual consensus was established. Resuming: they did not come to a unanimously response. These ambiguous answers clarify how people have different perspectives and that both views can capture a part of the truth. As described before this data from the interviews has been classified into second order themes and aggregated dimensions. For this sub question the aggregated dimensions consist of top-down claims and shared understanding. The classification of the 2nd order themes towards the aggregated dimensions, in this case the perspectives, is carried out by taking into account the definitions of these two perspectives. 'Top-down claims' is defined as an (in)explicit claim concerning organizational identity facilitated by the formal management of the organization. For every story that has to do with determining identity it is important to figure out according to the coding this coding scheme if identity in this case was determined by an (in)explicit claim or that members came to a consensus. If the story of the interviewee indicates a claim it is important to assess if this claim was explicitly made by the formal management or was inexplicitly expressed by the majority of members.

'Shared understanding' is defined as members coming to a mutual consensus concerning their organizational identity without interfering or guidance by others except for each other, whereby the individuals (non)verbally communicate on an equal basis. If the story of the interviewee indicates a contribution by identity through (non)verbal communication there must be assessed if this consensus was reached by individuals that nonverbally communicate on an unequal base or by individuals that (non)verbally communicate on an equal base.
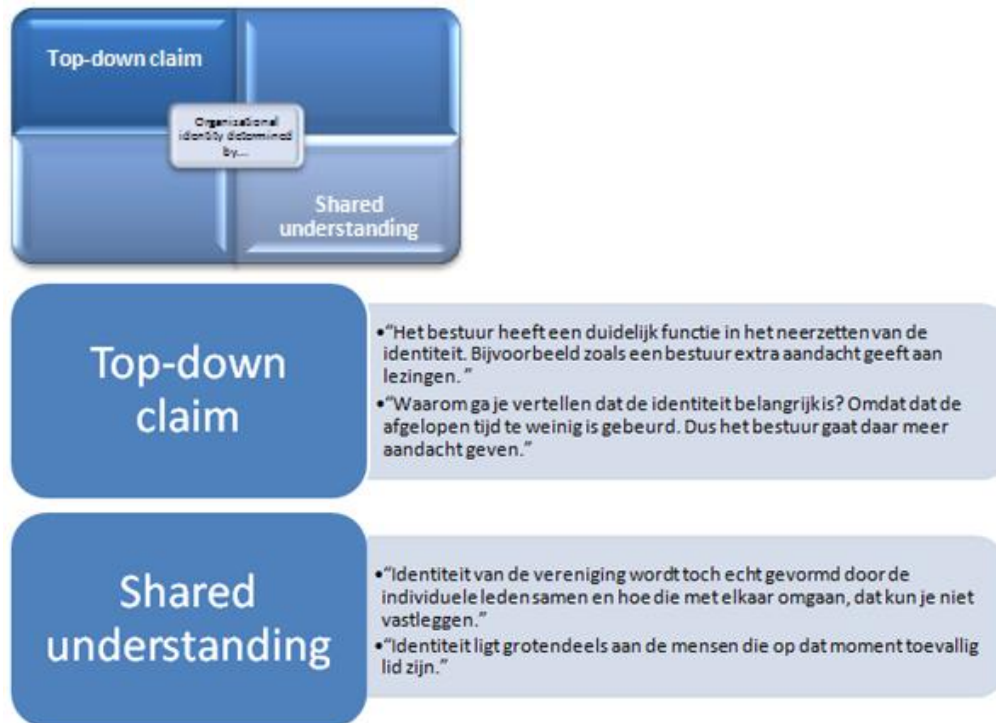
Figure 3: presence of identity determining perspectives according to current literature visible in VGS-Nederland

5.1.1 Top-down claim

A couple of interviewees explicitly agreed on the statement that an identity is determined by what the board claims. "The board has a clear function in stating an identity, for example when they give extra attention to certain aspects." In particular when it becomes difficult to maintain the desired identity, people expect the board to intervene. According to one interviewee the board should explain the organizational identity claim over and over, because it is essential to keep the organization alive and to give it decent opportunities for the future. If we would only take these interviews into account it seems rather positive for the effects of the top-down claim for an organizational identity.

But where some interviewees mentioned the desire and importance of top-down claims by the board other interviewees have completely refused this idea. They felt the urgency to tell how the top-down claim is complete nonsense. "The identity was not determined by a top-down claim. People pointed out identity towards each other and were looking for a mutual consensus," as stated by one interviewee. Other interviewees said: "I don't think the board is in the position to state: this is who we are" and "Nobody imposed us to be a certain collective."

Altogether the desire for a top-down claim differs from person to person in the organizations of VGS-Nederland. Interviewees have experienced the presence of a certain claim for identity differently.

5.1.2 Shared understanding

Even though some interviewees explicitly stated in the interviews how identity is top-down determined there were other interviewees who explicitly indicated that identity is determined by

mutual consensus. Some even called the current identity coincidental-based; if other individuals would be member of the student organization, the identity would be completely different and has nothing to do with the identity of the organization. But the dominant idea was that identity is primarily formed between the members, as on interviewee said: "The identity of an organization is really construed by the individuals and how they interact, it cannot be captured." This view is completely in contrary to what people said about an identity determined by the claim of the institute.

5.1.3 Cooperating perspectives

To give an answer to the dispute between claims and understandings, experienced in ones organization, is a quite arbitrary thing to do. It is a choice between black and white where people have a more nuanced and complex solution for determining organizational identity.

Resuming the stories from the interviews there is a lot to say for the claim-side and a lot to say for the shared understanding-perspective. But it is not black or white; the interviewees who adhered to the claim-side acknowledges in the rest of their narratives parts of identity that cannot be controlled and the interviewees who adhered the shared understanding perspective mentioned examples of how the board still tried to manage identity. More stories came forward in the interviews that cannot be allocated to a certain perspective right now. Therefore new perspectives have been created.
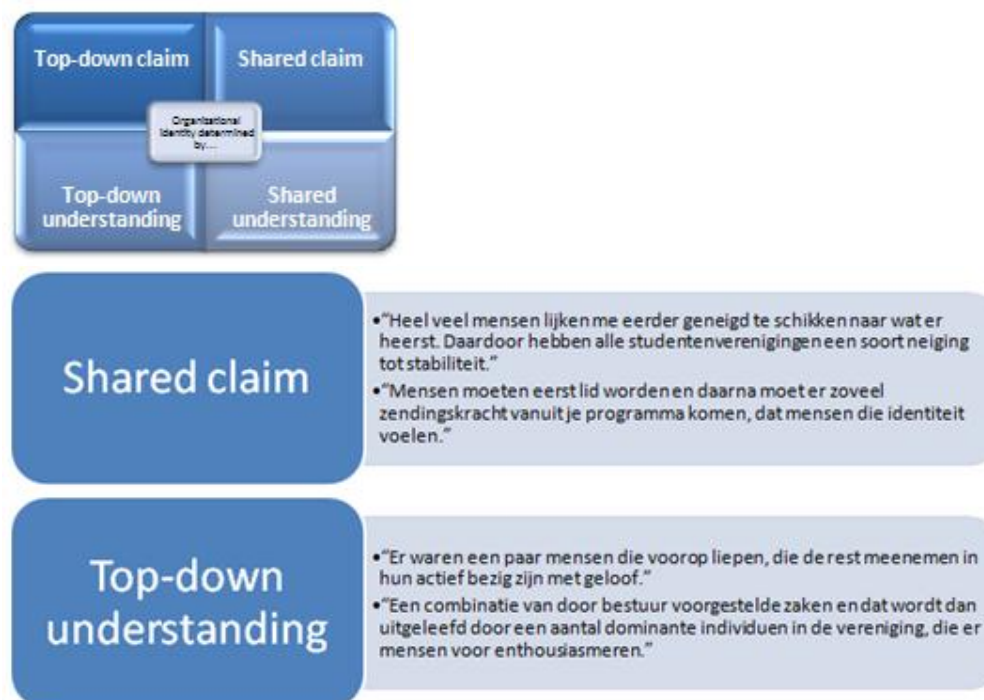

Figure 4: presence of newly added identity determining perspectives in VGS-Nederland

5.2 Towards a shared claim and a top-down understanding

The two current perspectives on identity determination are able to partially explain the identity of VGS-Nederland. But problems would arise when we try to allocate every social mechanism

that defines a part of the identity of VGS-Nederland. For example the social mechanisms of example roles or the mechanism of social control would not be easily allocated to one of both perspectives. If for example the social mechanism of social control would be allocated to the 'top-down claims', it would give a misrepresentation of how the mechanism of social control works, because it is a claim coming from every single member, not only from the top. And if for example an individual, in conversation with another individual, would come to an adjusted understanding on a certain standing point concerning its organizations identity, this mechanism would easily be allocated to the perspective of 'shared understanding', but this term would also be a misrepresentation, because it is not an honest shared understanding when one individuals opinion is more powerful than the opinion of the other individual. To overcome these problems of limited perspectives two new perspectives have been added.

Again the quotes from the interviews were classified into the aggregated dimensions, i.e. the four perspectives. The quotes have been allocated to the right perspective according to the following definitions: 'shared claim' is defined as an (in)explicit claim concerning organizational identity facilitated by the majority of members. 'Top-down understanding' is defined as members coming to a mutual consensus concerning their organizational identity without interfering or guidance by others except for each other, whereby individuals (non)verbally communicate on an unequal base.

5.2.1 Shared claim

These four perspectives above are the building blocks for the theoretical framework. Where before 'claims' cohered with 'top-down' and 'shared' cohered with 'understanding' they no longer do in the two new perspectives. The first new perspective is the ´shared claim´, which consists of a claim that does not have any connotation with the top of the institute, but can be made by the entire group of members in the form of social pressure. This shared claim is referring to the ´panopticon´ where everyone shows the desired behavior, by not deviating from the shared claim concerning the organizational identity. This perspective came forward in the interviews: according to one interviewee members tend to conform to the prevailing opinion, what is motivated by the 'panopticon' of social control. Another interviewee puts it into words as ´a need for missionary power´; the group sends out a message with the desire that it is adopted by new members.

5.2.2 Top-down understanding

The other new perspective is the perspective of top-down understanding. Determining identity through shared understanding usually had the connotation with individual members interacting on an equal base at the bottom of the organization. But this new perspective assumes interaction between top and bottom individuals, but without making any claims, coming to a mutual understanding through interaction. Noteworthy is that this interaction between top and down does not have to be a formal top of the organization, but can easily be a highly valued member of the organization that carries out its example function. In the interviews about VGS-Nederland there were mentioned a lot of cases where identity was formed by the help of a couple of example functions who led people in a certain direction. According to an interviewee identity became determined as it was with the help of the people who walked in front. Another

interviewee mentions how the board of the organization suggests an identity, but that it be-comes reality because of some dominant individuals who actualize the identity, because other members will follow these dominant individuals in their behavior.

5.3 Allocating social mechanisms into the four perspectives

But how did these perspectives come forward in the everyday developments in the identity of VGS-Nederland? I will demonstrate this along, by the interviewees considered as, four major developments in identity; how did these shifts in identity develop through time? What perspective(s) fits best to the social mechanisms that are responsible for the developments? First I will explain briefly the four major changes that are validated by the interviewees (figure 5). The first development in identity is a change in the most defining part of the identity of the VGS-Nederland organizations: shifting to a personal form of the Christian faith. The second development is the attitude towards academic education provided by the own student organizations. Third is the diminishing degree of activism, which becomes visible in the frequency and dura-tion of activities. The fourth development is the progress of identity from a rigid and hard or-ganization into a soft and dynamic organization where there is room for vulnerability and choosing one owns path. These four developments in identity lead to a recurring process of change in identity. All four elements will be introduced by describing how this element once contributed to the identity, followed by the developments this element went through, ending with the how the four different perspectives have determined this element in identity. In con-clusion the data from the interviews will be triangulated along the data of archival documents to find out if both sources of data match.

Figure 5: the four major developments in the identity of VGS-Nederland according to interview-ees

Quotes will be used to support the described developments in identity and to support how the-se developments were set in motion by the four perspectives that are responsible for determin-ing identity. Figure 6 shows the interviewees' city of study, their period of study and the posi-tion they held in the context of managing and visioning identity. The interviewees are equally

distributed over the period of 25 years that were pointed out as relevant for the identity development by Klapwijk (2006). From every city at least one person has been interviewed with a maximum of two interviewees coming from one city. Almost all interviewees have held the position of board member, some of them chairman, but they were all particularly involved with the identity of their organization. The quotes below are presented with the study period of the interviewee to indicate who mentioned it and to create a better image of developments through time.

Interviewee number 1	Interviewee number 2	Interviewee number 3	Interviewee number 4	Interviewee number 5	Interviewee number 6	Interviewee number 7
• Utrecht • 1993-1998 • Chairman	• Utrecht • 1994-1999 • Chairman	• Delft • 1995-2001 • Board member	• Kampen • 1995-2003 • Board member	• Nijmegen • 2001-2006 • Board member	• Amsterdam • 2003-2009 • Chairman	• Wageningen • 2004-2010 • Chairman

Interviewee number 8	Interviewee number 9	Interviewee number 10+11	Interviewee number 12	Interviewee number 13	Interviewee number 14	Interviewee number 15
• Delft • 2003-2011 • Board member	• Leiden • 2004-2010 • Board member	• Rotterdam • 2004-2014 • Chairmen	• Enschede • 2007-2017 • Board member	• Groningen • 2007-2014 • Member	• Enschede • 2010-2018 • Member	• IFES • Director

Figure 6: interviewees

5.3.1 Shift in Christian faith

5.3.1.1 Starting point

As noted earlier, in the period of 1950-1990 VGS-Nederland consisted of a couple of student organizations in university cities that were extremely tight; it was an extremely homogenous group of people that tried to hold on to their own identity in a time of a social-cultural revolution. In this era it was a task for the student organizations to keep the members far from the worldly influences. (Klapwijk, 1990) In particular the practices of the members' Christian belief could be called conservative and it had its effects on the identity of the organization.

5.3.1.2 Developments in Christian faith

Considering the results of the semi-structured interviews the most recurring topic was the change of the Christian identity the VGS-organizations went through. In the early '90s the student organizations could be typed as a strongly closed circuit, where internal focus was most important. This led to a church culture of consensus and homogeneity, where the rest of the world functioned as an example of what they did not want to become. (Klapwijk, 1990) The rigid thoughts on theology did leave little to no room for personal findings, neither for the vulnerable and personal side of thoughts. The interviewees state a slow development from this rigid attitude to a more open-minded en vulnerable attitude on the aspect of Christian faith. The cause for this incremental development of identity can be found, according to the interviews, in a broader shift in the entire group of 'pillarized' organizations. This was accelerated by a couple VGS-organizations that joined the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES), which was triggered by expanded contact with other Christian students.

Examining the interviews chronologically looking for top-down policies there is a trend of adding (or even starting) evenings of bible study in the 90's, becoming a member of IFES in six or-

ganizations between 1998 and 2008 and the addition of a weekend that is characterized by personal faith in at least four organizations in the late 00's and early 10's.

Top-down understanding

Er waren een paar mensen die voorop liepen, die de rest meenemen in hun actief bezig zijn met geloof. (2001-2006)

Ik heb in mijn tijd ook wel dingen zien veranderen. Een belangrijke daarvan was het contact met andere christelijke studentenverenigingen en IFES. Vragen als wat betekent geloven voor je en wat voor plek moet geloven krijgen binnen de vereniging werden gesteld. (1994-1999)

In mijn periode kwam er ook wel meer een open-mind, zo zijn we bijvoorbeeld toen lid geworden van IFES. Maar dat werd wel heel erg beklonken door een aantal voorvechters en ik weet niet wat er is gebeurd toen die voorvechters verdwenen. (1995-2001)

Ook IFES-conferenties heeft de VGSx doen veranderen tot meer getuigen willen zijn, contact met anders-kerkelijken. (2007-2017)

Wat wel ook een factor was in de identiteit is dat je altijd te maken hebt met groepsgedrag en één van dingen die je op VGSx had, was dat men colleges dogmatiek aan de Vrije Universiteit ging volgen. (1995-2003)

Die ontwikkeling naar meer christelijkheid kwam wel bij een aantal beeldbepalende figuren vandaan. (2003-2009)

Top-down claim

Toen ik lid werd waren wij nog geen lid van IFES, in mijn bestuursjaar werden we daarvan aspirant lid. (2004-2010)

Ook werd er in mijn tijd een extra weekend ingevoerd wat helemaal in het teken van bijbelstudie stond. (2004-2010)

Volgens mij hebben we wel wat bijbelstudies toegevoegd aan het jaarrooster. (1994-1999)

Shared understanding

Zo gingen mensen bij de VGSx ook wel boeken lezen omtrent persoonlijk geloof. (2004-2010)

Op inhoudelijk vlak ging het steeds meer over persoonlijk geloof dan over de kerk. (2003-2011)

5.3.1.3 Weighing the perspectives

According to the interviews the experienced development in Christianity can be attributed to multiple perspectives. The most present social mechanism visible when examining this development is the mechanism of activists/enthusiasts: some people advocated the less rigid side of Christian faith, along the line of organizations like IFES, which led to a less rigid Christian identity. Next to this, with the help of example roles, VGS-Nederland turned into a Christian student organization that became exponentially more open-minded. We can find the social mechanisms of 'example roles' and 'enthusiasts' in the perspective of 'top-down understanding' where people do act on the behalf of others who appear to be higher on the informal ladder. ´Shared claims´ and ´top-down claims´ on the topic of Christianity became less and less appreciated. Therefore the Christian element of VGS-Nederland has been primarily changed by the social mechanism of example roles and enthusiasts, two social mechanisms that cannot be explained by the existing perspective of a top-down claim, but can neither be explained by the uncontrol-

lability of the shared understanding. Both example roles and enthusiasts are best being explained by the new perspective of top-down understanding.

5.3.2 Diminishing interest for academic education

5.3.2.1 Starting point

According to literature and interviews the organizations of VGS-Nederland had a great interest in discussing deep philosophical and theological subjects. It is even a fixed goal in the regulations of most VGS-organizations to let members develop into Christian academics. But what does that implicate, a Christian academic? According to the University of Twente 'academic education' withholds 'the education of a student during a university study on the field of basic intellectual skills, an investigating attitude, disciplinary knowledge and cross-border skills, on both education and research, as extra-curricular activities.' This seems like a wonderful aspiration, but the truth is that there is more than half a century of criticism on the focus of universities on the education of professions instead of a focus on academic education. (Popma, 1969) Van der Vusse et al. (2011) is under the impression that since the 60's a higher number of students led to a more efficiency-driven university at the expense of 'fruitful uselessness'; an education that contributes to expanding the own horizon of reflection. Because of this newly conducted university policy the VGS-organization have, consciously or subconsciously, taken the matters into their own hands. Since that moment they have tried to provide their own academic education from the perspective of their shared religious base. (Klapwijk, 1990)

5.3.2.2 Developments in academic interest

The positive attitude towards academic education was present until the late '90s, but discussing difficult topics slowly lost its interest. Most interviewees notify that members of VGS-organizations started to search for the usefulness of academic education. Some interviewees mentioned how it is due to the makeable reality, where everything needs to be useful. And if there is no point of it, no goal, no clear function than it is unnecessary. It came down to a decrease in enthusiasm and respect for academic activities. According to the interviews the content of intellectual activities was diminishing, this had to do with the amount of effort members wanted to give it. Partially this is caused by external influence like a society that has no longer affiliation with a widely academic education, but also smaller external institutions like their universities are of influence on the members. One interviewee allocates the development to a developing society on the subject of academic education, not necessarily in an inferior direction, but transferring knowledge cannot be executed the same way as fifty years ago. Students nowadays have a very strong urge for sociability which leads, combined with the pressure on activism, to a diminishing demand for academic activities.

Examining the interviews chronologically looking for top-down policies there is trend visible; in the late 90's no interviewee mentioned a significant decrease in enthusiasm for and attending academic activities, but in the middle of the 00's it is a widely represented problem. In this period decisions have been taken that contributed to the diminishing factor of the academic aspect of the student organizations.

Shared understanding

Inhoudelijk verzwakte er ondertussen ook wel wat, toen ik lid werd stonden studiekringen hoog op de agenda wat meer verschoof naar gesprekken over hoe je christen bent in de dagelijkse praktijk. Ik denk dat die inhoudelijke doelstelling over de jaren langzaamaan verdwenen is en dat mensen nu vooral op zoek zijn naar een gezellige vereniging. (1995-2001)

Ik heb wel het idee dat het vormende aspect door de jaren heen veranderde, zo veranderen de studiekringen met uitersten waarin zware onderwerpen besproken werden naar een spectrum wat juist het andere uiterste bevatte; studiekringen die gingen filmkijken of bridgen. (2003-2009)

Maar ik zag het wel echt minder worden in mijn tijd. Waar eerst voor een themaavond nog diep gestudeerd wat in boeken, werd dat animo echt minder. (2001-2006)

De pijlers verschuiven. Het intellectuele gaat omlaag, het sociale blijft, mensen lijken alleen nog maar voor de gezelligheid te komen. (2007-2014)

Shared claim

Ik denk ook dat als je het op de man af zou vragen dan zit het gros van de bezoekers bij de lezing omdat ze het aangeleerd hebben gekregen, niet omdat ze er zelf voor zouden kiezen. (2004-2014)

Maar de de vraag is: is intellectualiteit een lezing van drie kwartier en dan een vragenronde? Of is dat interactief knutselen? De invulling daarvan is behoorlijk aan subjectiviteit onderhevig. (2004-2014)

Maar ik zag het wel echt minder worden in mijn tijd. Waar eerst voor een themaavond nog diep gestudeerd wat in boeken, werd dat animo echt minder. Ik heb een behoorlijk snelle verschuiving van activisme meegemaakt, ik herkende me op een gegeven moment helemaal niet meer in de eerstejaars, die gewoon helemaal niks meer interessant vonden. Ze werden wel lid, maar niet echt lid wat mij betreft. Als je academisch onderwijs volgt, dan moet je toch een interesse hebben in de dingen om je heen. (2001-2006)

Top-down understanding

Soms misschien een toevallige samenloop van enthousiastelingen op de juiste plekken. (2007-2017)

Toen ik net lid werd waren de aansprekende figuren de mensen die wezen op lezingen en ook kwamen. Later werden de dominante figuren, sociaal gezien, degenen die vooral het bier drinkende deel van de vereniging leuk vond. Dat maakt denk ik wel veel verschil. Je hebt altijd een aantal mensen die 'de gaven' zijn, met wie mensen gezien willen worden. Wat zij voorleven is belangrijk voor de cultuur van de vereniging. Ik heb wel het idee dat daar wel een wisseling in heeft plaatsgevonden. (2003-2009)

De VGSx had ook een zekere organisatiestructuur waarbij mensen in commissies de inhoud van lezingen en bijbelkringen bepaalden. Daardoor had een toevallige samenstelling van commissies invloed op waar dat jaar over gesproken wordt. (2004-2010)

Ik denk wel dat bepaalde ouderejaars informeel de kar trokken. Mensen die en een groot hart voor de vereniging hadden en makkelijk hun mond open trokken. (2004-2010)

Top-down claims

Het aanbod van het academische was er, het werd redelijk gedragen, maar er was niet veel zendingsdrang. (1993-1998)

Ik durf wel te zeggen dat ik als bestuurder de bezoekers bij de lezingen heb zien dalen en de animo voor de vakgroepen ook heb zien dalen. (2003-2009)

Het congres dat van jaarlijks naar tweejaarlijks is gegaan. (2007-2017)

Vroeger hadden we zes lezingen in het jaar, dat zijn er inmiddels vier geworden. (2004-2014)

5.3.2.3 Weighing the perspectives

The data shows evidently that academic education organized by VGS-Nederland itself devaluated. This was caused through all four perspectives of identity determination, but mostly it was a battle between the perspective of 'shared understanding' against the perspectives of a 'shared claim' and 'top-down understanding'. The uncontrollable identity determination through 'shared understanding' was responsible for drifting away from academic activities. An attempt to counter this shift in identity was tried by relying on social control, the 'shared claim', that had some impact and by opposing the shift through adopting an example role to influence academic activities positively, the 'top-down understanding'.

Looking at the stories from interviewees it is evident that the two new perspectives are necessary to explain how this current identity was build. It would be insufficient to explain this identity only with the explanatory power of an institutionalized claim opposite to an uncontrollable shared understanding. Although we do see how that last perspective, the 'shared understanding' was very present in determining this academic part of identity. Typical for this perspective is the exclamation –"it just happened"- of multiple interviewees by which they indicate that they cannot pin down a cause for the shift that they have experienced. It seems like the social mechanism of the renewal of members plays a big role in it. Every year it became harder to convince new members of the academic part of identity, even to the point of that one interviewee said: "They became a member, but for me they did not really become a member. If you attend an academic education, you should at least be interested in the world around you, right?"

5.3.3 Decreasing activism

5.3.3.1 Starting point

As mentioned before the orthodox-protestant ´pillar´, where the organizations originate from, was a closed circuit. When people need to spend their attention, enthusiasm and time on merely one organization there is a lot of time available. Interviewees called it for example 'living by the grace of the organization' or said the following: "You don't need communication tools, because the VGSx was your life, you were constantly living around each other." This also led to an undesirable social control, but it is unquestionable that there was an exceptional degree of activism.

In the same period the general commitment towards organizations was high according to a study from the Dutch 'Sociaal & Cultureel Planbureau', but fractures in commitment to organizations were visible in the 20th century. (De Hart, 1999) The research appoints 'organizational

apathy' and 'organizational tiredness'. Because of 'depillarization' people are no longer perpetual connected to a certain 'pillar' and are able to follow their own goals instead of a collective goal.

Interesting fact is that a recent study from the Dutch Central Bureau for Statistics mentions the relative high commitment of orthodox-protestants; 'gereformeerden', towards organizations: "Zo blijkt dat mannen, hoogopgeleiden, jongeren en 65-plussers, gereformeerden, autochtonen, plattelandsbewoners en werkenden relatief vaak lid zijn van verenigingen." (Kloosterman & Coumans, 2014, p. 2).

5.3.3.2 Developments in activism

A shift in identity over time is visible through the quotes below. Where in the late 90's and even the early 00's members did not worry about a phenomena called 'diminishing activism', this attitude disappeared like a puff of smoke. Although it differed from organization to organization; some of them addressed the problem around the turn of the century where others mentioned how the problem arose after their membership, around the 10's.

If we take a close look to what explanations are given for the change in attitude towards activism it becomes clear that the experienced cause differs from person to person. Some mention a general change of loyalty to organizations, which can be confirmed by theory. Others mention how the social pressure decreased, wherefore members feel more freedom to let activities pass by. But most interviewees attribute the problem of diminishing activism to governmental rules in the context of shortening study duration; cutting on scholarships and other financing, decreased subsidizing of student activism, demanding a certain study progress, etc. Particularly new members were often accused of limited activism, but this was the logical consequence of the governmental rules.

Top-down claims

Maar in mijn tijd hebben we niet heel erg hoeven bijsturen op het bezoeken van activiteiten. (1994-1999)

Ook de invoering van het BSA heb ik meegemaakt. Ik merk dat er vandaag de dag ook veel meer binnen de vereniging gehamerd wordt op het halen van je studiepunten, omdat het zo belangrijk is. (2007-2014)

De aanwezigheid bij lezingen is gemiddeld genomen ook wel een beetje afgenomen, dat hing wel samen met de cultuur en misschien een beetje de inhoud. Ik herinner mij wel een lezing waarbij er 15 aanwezig waren en dat je daar met schaamte staat. (2004-2010)

Shared understanding

Maar ik denk ook dat je in de hele samenleving een afnemend commitment ziet naar verenigingen. Mensen willen zich wel committeren voor een bepaalde klus, maar willen zich niet voor jaren vastleggen. (2003-2009)

Als je het hebt over binding dan zag je wel dat het bezoek van themaavonden in de loop van de tijd echt afnam, feesten ging men minder lang, soosavond gingen mensen minder en korter, die tendens zag je echt wel; minder frequent bezoek en minder lang.(2001-2006)

Dat heeft de algemene betrokkenheid doen verminderen, VGSx is als het ware een hobby en mensen hebben nu minder tijd voor hun hobby. (2010-2018)

Toen ik net lid was hadden mensen meer tijd om student te zijn. Dat betekent dat je daar meer de diepte in kan gaan, zowel in het zinnige als in het onzinnige. (2007-2017)

Shared claim
Ik denk dat het vandaag de dag wel minder is geworden, activisme; dat het meer geaccepteerd is om even bij vrienden langs te gaan tijdens een activiteit van de VGSx. Dat had ik in mijn tijd nooit op de verenigingsavond gepland. (2004-2014)
Je leven speelt zich compleet af binnen die vereniging. Wat een fantastisch maar ook volstrekt absurd gegeven is. Opeens leef je 24 uur per dag bij de gratie van die vereniging. (2004-2010)

5.3.3.3 Weighing the perspectives

The perspective of the 'shared claim' was very effective for maintaining a certain degree of activism. But this shared claim crumbled, with the consequence of a loss of social control, according to some interviewees. Other interviewees mention how they expressed some moral appeals as board members in the context of activism, but these top-down claims did not have any effects on the long term to determine the identity of VGS-Nederland.

The activism-element of identity became more and more determined by the uncontrollable perspective of 'shared understanding', where social control, example roles and top-down moral appeals were not powerful enough to keep determining the identity characteristic of high activism. The social mechanism present within the perspective of 'shared understanding' that, according to some interviewees, was most influential was simply the renewal of members. When governmental restrictions were introduced for a shorter period of studying new members started their membership with a different balance between study and activism in other student activities. New members come to a mutual consensus where activism has a lower place on the list of priorities, because they feel the pressure of governmental measures. This contributes to another identity were VGS-Nederland is less characterized by high activism.

5.3.4 Softer attitude

5.3.4.1 Starting point

The organization of VGS-Nederland emanated from a church that had a rigid doctrine of how the Bible should be interpreted and explained. The certainty and even a claim on the truth inside the 'pillar' led to judgmental thoughts. (Kamphuis, 2014) This setting portrays a culture of how interaction easily led to conflict. But not only was the rigidity of faith of influence, also the rationality of it left little room for a vulnerable attitude.

Next to this the VGS-organizations valued en still value the long tradition of the academic world in the Dutch culture. (Klapwijk, 1990) This involves the hierarchical and harsh world of the Dutch student culture what implies behavior where older members scold the younger members.

Because of this pre assumed homogeneous identity where everyone agreed upon there was a high involvement on this organization instead of any other organization. This led to a highly critical review of the functioning of every aspect of the organization. When members are able to spend a lot of time on reviewing the goings of the organization this will lead to a judgmental attitude.

Altogether these attitudes create an environment where people say it like it is. This could be encountered as both positive and negative. The hard side is responsible for an organization functioning as a well-oiled machine and at the same time for feelings that are not being shunned, which can lead to a very negative experience. Nevertheless it was a part of the experienced identity by the interviewees, even though it developed over time.

5.3.4.2 Developments in soft/harsh attitude

The organizations developed a sense of compassion and vulnerability that became stronger than the need for criticism according to the interviews. There were no interviewees who pointed out any top-down claims in the context of a development in attitude from harsh to soft, but multiple VGS-organizations have taken decisions lately in accordance to a more 'soft' organization. Examples of no longer holding on to obligations for young members (mostly first year students) are numerous. These decisions are also in relation to the regulations of government and universities concerning the length of the study time.

Asserting authority used to be common according to an interviewee. He saw how the older members of the organization put themselves and their opinion less in the spotlight. One interviewee mentioned this weakening of identity, by transferring identity through soft social mechanisms, as a negative development: "A out of control process of democratization has taken place in the student organizations that is really bad, and when you admit to this process you will be vanished soon." But the positive influence is that a rigid, harsh attitude is not appreciated by the majority of the members and therefore not desirable as an organization.

Shared claim

Ik denk dat het vandaag de dag wel minder is geworden, activisme; dat het meer geaccepteerd is om even bij vrienden langs te gaan tijdens een activiteit van de VGSx. Dat had ik in mijn tijd nooit op de verenigingsavond gepland. (2004-2014)

Je leven speelt zich compleet af binnen die vereniging. Wat een fantastisch maar ook volstrekt absurd gegeven is. Opeens leef je 24 uur per dag bij de gratie van die vereniging. (2004-2010)

Ik heb ook het idee dat vroeger de mensen wat uitgesprokener waren en dat het helemaal niet erg was als de helft van de vereniging daarnaar zat te kijken, dat autoritaire en hierarchische was wat normaler. Nu spreken de oudere leden zich wat minder uit, ze stellen zich wat minder nadrukkelijk op. (2004-2014)

Shared understanding

Het jasje-dasje, brallerige, corporale is wel minder geworden door de jaren. (2003-2011)

Het was ook een harde vereniging, heel veel mannen, weinig vrouwen, ook dat is anders nu. (2007-2017)

Ik zag wel een identiteitsverschuiving van hard aan de buitenkant en je zelf niet zoveel laten zien naar praten over je gevoelens, met elkaar bidden en zingen. (1995-2001)

Maar wat ik er nu van hoor die is er wel een hele anders sfeer inmiddels, meer een laagdrempelige socioclub, bedoel ik positief verder. Men heeft veel meer oog gekregen voor menselijke relaties. (1995-2003)

5.3.4.3 Weighing the perspectives

How did VGS-Nederland shift from a harsh attitude towards an organization that is able to show its soft side? According to the interviews this is primarily by the disappearance of claims. Either shared claims or top-down claims were not made any longer. The disappearance of the shared claims led to the loss of hierarchical relationships where claims could be made on the basis of authority. Once the commonness of authority has disappeared it has disappeared forever.

The social mechanisms of social control based on authority and a hierarchical organization were once responsible for the determination of VGS-Nederland. But when these mechanisms disappeared it became more open for democratic social mechanisms; a mechanism that comes from the perspective of shared understanding. This perspective of shared understanding contributed most in determining the soft attitude as identity characteristic in VGS-Nederland.

5.4 Recapitulating the four perspectives

For this thesis it is relevant why one story, in the form of a short quote from an interviewee, is assigned to a certain perspective. This has been carried out based on the definitions of the perspectives, but that method may seem static and incomprehensible. Therefore the process of allocating stories to the perspectives will be described here in a less static form.

Top-down claims

The top-down claims, which were rarely present, were not of a great influence for identity on the long term. When interviewees mentioned an exclamation of the board in the context of guidance concerning the organizational identity this quote would be allocated to this perspective of top-down claims. The claims varied from simple practical decisions which were responsible for a change in organized events to moral appeals that only worked until the next event, but it had no significance for the longer run.

"Toen ik lid werd waren wij nog geen lid van IFES, in mijn bestuursjaar werden we daarvan aspirant lid. (2004-2010)"

"Als bestuur hebben we wel eens een appel gedaan op de leden naar aanleiding van het teruglopende lezing bezoek, dat werd ook wel erkend toen. Maar het bleef toch wel vrijblijvend." (2003-2009)

"Ik herinner mij wel een lezing waarbij er 15 aanwezig waren en dat je daar met schaamte staat. Als bestuur hebben we toen wel wat chagrijnige mailtjes gestuurd." (2004-2010)

Shared understanding

The perspective of 'shared understanding' was overly present and was most relevant in determining the elements of the identity, when examining the causes of the previous mentioned identity shifts. Three of the four elements were strongly influenced by the determination of shared understanding. Quotes were allocated to the perspective of 'shared understanding' when interviewees mentioned how members shifted in their idea of the element of identity without any identifiable reason; sometimes combined with a combination of the words: 'it just happened'. The stories that adhered shared understanding usually were accompanied by how members mutually adjust the social norms; in particular lowering the bar of social control was a

frequently mentioned adjustment, what led to a greater influence of 'shared understanding' and a lesser determining role for the perspective of a 'shared claim'.

"De studentenvereniging is van zichzelf een hele conservatieve club, dat creëert een hoop waarborging. Gewoon doen wat je altijd doet, pochen met je eigen traditie, het feit dat iets traditie maakt het op zichzelf iets goeds, het wordt blijkbaar gewaardeerd. Je moet van goede huize komen wil je daar verandering in brengen. Tegelijk zie je sluipender wijs bezoekers bij lezingen en vakgroepen dalen, terwijl in de vorm van de vereniging alles hetzelfde is, wat is er dan veranderd?" (2003-2009)

"De VGSx had ook een zekere organisatiestructuur waarbij mensen in commissies de inhoud van lezingen en bijbelkringen bepaalden. Daardoor had een toevallige samenstelling van commissies invloed op waar dat jaar over gesproken wordt." (2004-2010)

"Het hing ook wel af van welke mensen er in een commissie werden gestopt, het hangt er heel erg vanaf hoe actief mensen een commissie willen draaien." (2007-2014)

"Ik heb wel gemerkt dat het heel makkelijk is om een traditie van vijf zes jaar in een seizoen kwijt te raken. Als mensen niet meer begrijpen waar het vandaan komt, wat na vijf zes jaar al zo kan zijn, dan loopt het risico te verdwijnen." (2004-2014)

"Soms misschien een toevallige samenloop van enthousiastelingen op de juiste plekken." (2007-2017)

"ALV's waren ook zo'n dingetje. Die duurden ooit tot diep in de nacht, zes uur 's ochtends enzovoort. Dan had je polemiek om de polemiek. De sport om anderhalf uur te doen over het voorstel wel of geen frikandellen bestellen. En in een jaartje of drie, vier waren die tijden voorbij. Dan was het effectief vergaderen, voorstellen er doorheen rammen en op tijd naar bed. Je zag de betrokkenheid naar beleid dalen en dat is ook iets wat je op meer plekken in de maatschappij ziet. Bij kerken is het ook niet meer wat het geweest is. Maar het kon nog niet liggen aan het sneller moeten studeren, want dat was destijds nog niet aan de orde. Wellicht een ander type aanwas, mensen die andere dingen interessant vinden. Niet het hemd van het lijf discussiëren maar gewoon een beetje in de kroeg staan. Misschien doet het er tegenwoordig minder toe als je verschillend denkt, men vindt het prima als de een A denkt en de ander B, zolang je elkaar maar niet neer steekt is het goed." (2001-2006)

Shared claim

Nevertheless the 'shared claim' still played a significant role in determining elements of the identity of VGS-Nederland. The elements of academic interest and high activism were strongly upheld by the influences of shared claims. Quotes that fit this perspective were recognized by statements concerning what was 'accepted' or 'not accepted' by the majority. Sometimes even examples where members acted the way they did because of the fear for opinions of others. Those were the perfect stories that fitted the social control present in VGS-Nederland.

"Ik denk dat het vandaag de dag wel minder is geworden, dat het meer geaccepteerd is om even bij vrienden langs te gaan ipv naar de VGSx. Dat had ik in mijn tijd nooit op donderdag gepland. Dat zou alleen een verjaardag of een concert zijn geweest. En als het even kan plan je zo'n concert op een vrijdag natuurlijk." (2004-2014)

"Maar je werd voortdurend aangesproken op als je een keer ergens niet was, bijvoorbeeld als je niet naar de kerk was geweest, er was heel veel sociale controle bij de VGSx, ook zonder whatsapp." (2004-2010)

"Ik denk ook dat als je het op de man af zou vragen dan zit het gros van de bezoekers bij de lezing omdat ze het aangeleerd hebben gekregen, niet omdat ze er zelf voor zouden kiezen." (2004-2014)

Top-down understanding
The last perspective of 'top-down understanding' became visible through the influence of the most charismatic, informal leaders who had a positive forming example role. It was best visible in the element of Christianity which became renewed by some enthusiasts and others that carried out a lifestyle with their example role. According to the interviewees a majority of people looked up to this behavior what resulted in a shift in the element of Christianity.

"Een combinatie van door bestuur voorgestelde zaken en dat wordt dan uitgeleefd door een aantal dominante individuen in de vereniging, die er mensen voor enthousiasmeren." (1995-2001)

"Er waren een paar mensen die voorop liepen, die de rest meenemen in hun actief bezig zijn met geloof." (2001-2006)

"Ik denk wel dat bepaalde ouderejaars informeel de kar trokken. Mensen die en een groot hart voor de vereniging hadden en makkelijk hun mond open trokken." (2004-2010)

"Ik keek zelf altijd op tegen senatoren, oud-senatoren, misschien is opkijken niet het juiste woord. Maar als je zelf ouderejaars wordt valt het niet eens zo op dat je dan een voorbeeldfunctie uitdraagt." (2007-2014)

5.5 Data triangulation

The semi-structured interviews are considered as most valuable and most complete data on the subject. Next to this there is little archival data that is used as triangulating data; this data will be compared to the stories from the interviewees. The use of triangulating data can make their stories more reliable. Reliability is particularly desired because in most organizations only one person has been interviewed.

The examined archival documents led to some more quotes that represent the shifts in identity. Although the documents do not describe the sequence of cause and effect as interviewees, they are of value in representing the urgency of the problem. The four quotes at the top underline the perpetual crisis of organizational identity in general. The couple of quotes below confirm the data from the interviews on the subjects of example roles, moral appeal on behavior and the ongoing discussion on valuing the academic interest. The data in the records and other archives is by no means divergent compared to the semi-structured interviews.

(Records VGS-Nederland assembly 06-03-2003) *De Zuster-Besturen Uitwisseling Dag zal als thema 'Identiteitscrisis in de VGS'en krijgen.*

(Records VGS-Nederland assembly 21-12-2002) *Er ontstaat discussie dat in punt 1 reeds het woord 'gereformeerd' moet worden opgenomen, in plaats van 'christelijk'. Na een peiling blijkt een meerderheid (6/11) het met hiermee eens te zijn.*

(Lustrum Bundle 2010, VGSR) *Aan het eind van het Lustrum is op de Vereniging een fundamentele discussie opgepakt. Het was veel van de leden der VGSR opgevallen dat er een hoop is veranderd op de Vereniging in het afgelopen lustrum. Deze veranderingen hebben ervoor gezorgd dat de VGSR toe is aan een bezinning over de eigen identiteit.*

(Chronicles VGST, 2003-2008) Hoe heeft het zover kunnen komen dat de verenigingsidentiteit zo vaag is geworden? (...) Ook in het gereformeerde denkklimaat heeft in de afgelopen jaren een verandering plaatsgevonden. De aloude 'Reformatie vs. Reformanda' discussie heeft geresulteerd in een afscheiding waarin harde woorden zijn gevallen.

(Lustrum Bundle) Lange tijd was het gebruikelijk dat ouderejaars grote invloed hadden op de Vereniging, waarbij deze ouderejaars veelal conservatief leken te zijn en grote waarde hechtten aan onze mores en traities. (…) Ook was het in het verleden niet ongebruikelijk om leden, in het bijzonder eerstejaars, erop aan te spreken als zij weinig actief waren op de VGSR.

(Lustrum Bundle) Waar het vroeger belangrijk was om onderdeel te zijn van 'de groep' en samen keuzes te maken, worden de beslissingen nu op individueel niveau genomen zonder al te veel rekening te houden met het collectief. Dit is vermoedelijk een weerspiegeling van hetgeen eveneens plaatsvindt in het kerkelijk leven. Deze ontwikkeling heeft al jaren geleden plaatsgevonden in seculiere kringen en dringt nu ook door binnen gereformeerd Nederland.

(Records VGS-Nederland assembly 18-12-2004) Am. xxx1 zegt dat de academische vorming een erfenis van vroegere tijden is, we vinden het stoer om er nog steeds aan te werken want dat deden ze vroeger ook al. Am. xxx2 vindt het ook wel "stoer", maar geeft aan dat er vroeger duidelijke redenen waren voor academische vorming, nu moeten we zoeken naar redenen. Am. xxx3 vindt dat er redenen genoeg zijn, maar dat we er niet genoeg op letten. De noodzaak om ons bezig te houden met academische vorming is er nog steeds. Am. xxx4 geeft aan dat we ook echt nog wel trots op onze academische vorming mogen zijn. Als je er maar goed mee bezig bent kost dit ook wel veel tijd. Voor eerstejaars is het nog wel eens lastig om de waarde van academische vorming in te leren zien, het leren waarderen is een proces.

6. Conclusion, implications, discussion & limitations

6.1 Conclusion

The main objective of this paper is to learn which of the four perspectives contributes most to the current organizational identity of VGS-Nederland. The first thing to be examined was if all four perspectives have established themselves as a present perspective in VGS-Nederland. By exploring the interviews this question can be answered with a resounding yes. Of course there is no doubt about the presence of the two perspectives used in the current literature, this is present in every organization, but the two newly added perspectives needed its justification.

Four perspectives contributing to an organizational identity

The interviewees described what contributed to the organizational identity of VGS-Nederland. They mentioned the organization-wide social control as mechanism that contributed a lot to the organizational identity. If we would allocate this social mechanism to the perspective of a top-down claim it would misrepresent the actual social mechanism, because the claim is coming from the majority of members and not specifically by the top. But the perspective of shared understanding would fit even less to this mechanism. Therefore the new perspective of a 'shared claim' is justified, because the important mechanism of social control fits the perspective. The interviewees also experienced the nonverbal communication and the informal conversations, where individuals come to an (adjusted) understanding because of mirroring charis-

matic example roles, as a valuable contribution to the organizational identity. Therefore this social mechanism of looking up to example roles would fit perfectly to the new perspective of top-down understanding.

Perspectives responsible for identity determination

All perspectives have been justified and are detected as a contribution to the identity of VGS-Nederland. The question is to what extent they contributed and therewith determined the identity of VGS-Nederland.

The perspective of *top-down claims* was announced by the academic literature as one of the two most influential factors in organizational identity, and this might still be the case in those commercial organizations where authority is assigned to the ones who control the paychecks. But in the case of VGS-Nederland, where hierarchy and authority is spread differently, the top down claims were least mentioned as relevant in the determination of identity. The claims, in the form of moral appeals from the board to the members, were occasionally present. But not a single interviewee indicated that top-down claims contributed to building up the elements of identity for the long term.

The perspective of *shared understanding* was supposed to be relevant in determining the organizational identity of VGS-Nederland according to the literature. And according to interviewees this perspective contributed the most to the organizational identity. This was the most uncontrollable form which contribution to the identity was widespread. Typical for this perspective were the exclamations of interviewees that shifts in identity "just happened" uncontrollably. It just happens through the social interaction between equal individual members that together come to a shared understanding that determines their identity. Interviewees experienced the presence of this 'shared understanding' in the loss of the academic interest, high activism and a harsh attitude as characterizing elements of identity.

The perspective of *shared claims* was not known by current literature and the usefulness of social control as a tool for identity was overlooked. The perspective is a method that can be used as tool for holding on to a current organizational identity. This perspective is used in VGS-Nederland in its defensive form; it was used to protect elements of identity. Social control contributed a long time to holding on to elements of the identity of VGS-Nederland; academic interest and high activism were maintained by social control. But these elements became less characteristic for the identity of VGS-Nederland because of the loss of social control that used to maintain the elements.

The perspective of *top-down understanding* was not taken into account by the academic literature for determining identity. The importance of charismatic example roles is mainly ignored. But according to the interviewees this top-down understanding was very relevant for introducing new elements in identity. In particular the element of Christianity in the identity of VGS-Nederland is determined by the influences of the top-down understanding. The development was first being suppressed by social control, but eventually embraced because of positive top-down understanding.

Social mechanisms responsible for identity determination

But eventually perspectives do not change organizational identity, social mechanisms do. The social interaction that is pointed out as most responsible for determining identity comes from the perspective of '*shared understanding*'. This perspective was characterized by the social interaction between members which is not supervised or controlled. The recurring demonstrable mechanism within this perspective is the 'renewal of members'. The members of VGS-Nederland are continuously renewed and if the organizations' existing identity is not transferred sufficiently this renewal of members will cause a new understanding in the elements of identity. Therefore a lack of transferring identity will lead to an uncontrolled new understanding of the organizations' identity by the new members. The perspective of *shared claims* was determined by the mechanism of social control, sometimes even experienced as social pressure. The perspective of *top-down understanding* existed because of the mechanisms of example roles and enthusiasts. Example roles led to mirroring of behavior and enthusiasts motivated indifferent members towards a characterizing element of identity. These social mechanisms together were most responsible for building up the current identity of VGS-Nederland.

6.2 Implications

This research implicates that some perspectives deserve the focus of the manager more than other perspectives. For example the perspective of shared understanding is trumping the other perspectives in contributing to identity. As a manager it would be wise to accept some loss of control, because there will be a part of identity determined by this uncontrollable element of shared understanding. Nevertheless there are plenty of other methods to control identity, because the other three perspectives do have their controllable aspects. But management teams in organizations without a hierarchy because of payrolls should not make the mistake to assume their power is already enough to adjust or control the organizational identity. If a management team needs to hold on to a current element of identity it would be useful to reinforce the social control. But if a management team wants to introduce a new element of identity I would advise them to develop this element through example roles and enthusiasm that needs to be mirrored by the ones that should adopt this new element of identity.

This paper has its implications for organizations comparable to VGS-Nederland; other organizations were the formal management does not have complete authority. But that does not mean the newly added perspectives would be absent in organizations were the authority of formal management is respected. The mechanisms of social control and charismatic example roles would probably be less strong compared to the case of VGS-Nederland, but they would still be present and relevant. New research could examine if these mechanism deserve more attention in commercial organizations.

6.3 Discussion

This paper explored the determination of an organizational identity and did this by adding two new perspectives to the two perspectives that are able to determine identity according to current literature. Current literature might defend that every organizational identity is determined by the already existing perspectives of claims and understanding. This paper does not disagree

with how these perspectives explain identity, because they do, but some social mechanisms would not fit the perspectives as they do now.

Maybe some organizational identities can be explained by only the two perspectives that are known to current literature. This would mean that identity is partially determined by claims made by the institute and partially determined by the mutual consensus the organizations' members develop. The organizational identity would be determined by only these two components. But there would be little to no room for informal mechanisms contributing to an identity; it would be simply the hierarchical claims combined with the complete informal area of shared understanding as the only perspectives that have contributed to the identity.

It is arguable that the newly added perspectives in this paper are a form of how people negotiate understandings and therefore would both fit to the existing perspective of shared understanding. It would also be arguable to claim that both perspectives added by this paper are an informal form of claims and therefore would fit the perspective of institutionalized claims. But the fact that it is arbitrary to allocate the added perspectives to one of the existing perspectives indicates that they mark a transitional area of identity determination that deserves its own perspectives.

6.4 Limitations

Examined documents and interviewees

A lot of information has not been taken into account. Many more former members of VGS-Nederland could have been interviewed to perceive a more complete perspective on the organizational change. And the ones that were interviewed were highly involved in the organization, which leaves the question how less involved members would have experienced the process of identity change. Next to this there are a lot of annual reports that were not involved in this research, even though some of them are taken into account. Some identity describing documents, I was aware of, were untraceable.

Interaction

Ideally there would be some everyday interaction in the research design that pinpoints the development towards a consensus. But all consensuses, as result of social mechanisms, I am aware of is from the narratives that the interviewees have told and were not observed empirically. Therefore we have to trust on how the interviewees experienced and described the social mechanisms they participated in.

Small organizations

The examined organizations had the opportunity for informal structures; therefore these informal structures are relevant for the identity. When an organization becomes larger the formal structures become more and more relevant and the information from this paper will become less relevant. But in a large organization there are still organizational identities present on a lower level, where to this research can be applied.

True identity

Identity is too intangible to determine it and put it in writing, where every member would agree upon. I started defining organizational identity as possibly ambiguous and that is what it still is: ambiguous. This paper explained how identity forms itself, but this paper does not give answer

to who decides on the true identity. This paper wants to explain what contributes to the determination of identity but avoids determining the identity of an organization.

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Appendix A

What follows is a short description of all interviewees to gain a little context on the people and their experience with the identity of their organization. It shows when and where they were a member. The blue dot represents the city of their study period, the red dot represents where the interview took place (and is near the place they live nowadays). Every interviewee is accompanied by one of its quotes that were typical for the interview and try to give a better insight in the context of their VGS-Nederland experiences.

Interviewee number 1

Interviewee number 1 experienced his student organization as an enormous network of contacts and friendships from different study interests and from different places through the country. Socially and personally the organization was valuable, also because of its room for doubting faith. Interviewee number 1 was abundantly involved in his organization. He served a year as the chairman of the board and became subsequently seriously involved as deputy of the nationwide organization, which even led to some efforts for the commemorative collection that was published in honor of fifty years of VGS student organizations.

"De VGSU was ook een vereniging waar studentikoziteit vocht met 'doe maar gewoon'. Dus aan de ene kant het brallen, waar een deel van de vereniging per se niet mee wilde. Een deel van de vereniging dat wilde per se jasjes dragen en een ander deel absoluut niet. Een deel wat veel drinken heel normaal vond en een deel dat daar heel kritisch over was, een zeer pluriforme vereniging.
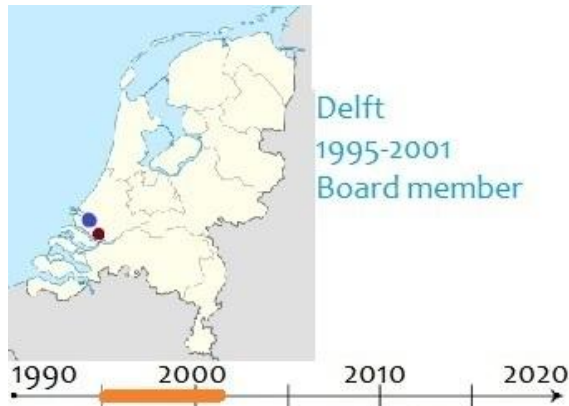
Interviewee number 2

Interviewee number 2 initially considered social contacts and education as important, but he did not think it would have led to being the chairman of the organization. It turned out otherwise; he became the chairman and had to vision a path for the student organization in its complex context. He had to give direction to the identity of the organization.

"Oud-gedienden vonden het idee van bijbelstudie belachelijk, we hoefden geen kerk te worden. Bijbelstudie doen werd als redelijk suf gezien. "

Interviewee number 3 considers his student period as a valuable base for the rest of your career. He purposely calls it a theoretical base, because true practical learning starts afterwards. He was once member of the organizations' board and chairman of the committee which organizes the nationwide VGS-seminar.

Delft
1995-2001
Board member

1990 2000 2010 2020

"De identiteit werd niet eens zozeer bewust gewaarborgd, het zat gewoon in de studentikoze cultuur. Je gaat ergens een commitment aan en daar houden we elkaar aan. Zeker bij de serieuze activiteiten werd er van je verwacht dat je kwam en als je niet kwam werd je daarop aangesproken. Je kunt je achteraf afvragen of dat echt nodig was. Tegelijk levert het een manier van omkijken naar elkaar op, dat je elkaar erbij betrekt en elkaar in de gaten houdt, ik denk dat dat wel wat had. Maar een cultuur veranderd altijd, want mensen komen en gaan. En de mensen vormen de cultuur, daarom kun je de identiteit nooit helemaal vasthouden, moet je ook niet willen denk ik. Er was niet een strategie om de identiteit vast te houden."

You might wonder: is there a certified university in Kampen? There is. The education for becoming a minister is housed in Kampen. Interviewee number 4 experienced his student time on one hand positive as a platform to build relationships, but on the other hand negative as a place of unilateral rationality.

Kampen
1995-2003
Board member
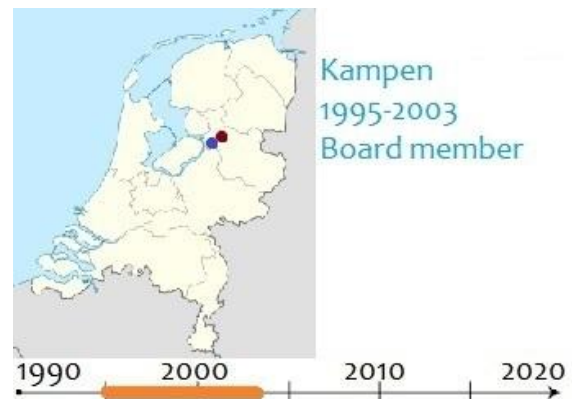
"Ik kan me niet herinneren dat de mensen waar tegen opgekeken werd bepalend waren in de identiteit. Niet zozeer in het waarborgen. Er was ook

1990 2000 2010 2020

niet zozeer iets om te waarborgen, wij wilden vooral verder, af van het feit dat alles zo op slot zat. En nu is dat ook helemaal weg, echt een tijdsbeeld van toen."

"Men ging colleges dogmatiek aan de Vrije Universiteit volgen. Dat was wel een identiteitsdingetje, van als je wilt verder komen dogmatisch dan ga je gewoon naar de Vrije Universiteit. Dat was het revolutionaire dingetje. Daar gingen we best met een club naar Kees van der Kooij en best wel een aardverschuiving voor sommigen in Kampen."
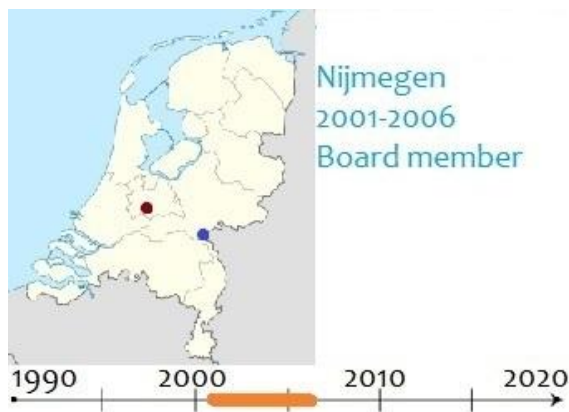
Interviewee number 5

Interviewee number 5 was once a board member at his student organization and was later on a board member of the overarching organization of Christian students in Nijmegen. Because of these experiences he recognized the differences between the Christian student organizations and was aware of the identity and corresponding characteristics of his own organization. Interviewee number 5 has a lot of thoughts on the positioning of their own identity between other Christian student organizations; in its best day the organization was characterized by faith, academic activities and parties.

"We waren een clubje eigenwijze nakkers. 10% was niet gereformeerd, en degenen met de gereformeerde achtergrond waren relatief snel klaar met hun gereformeerde wereldje. Dus een groot deel neigde al naar het evangelische. Er werd best wel afgezet tegen de GKv."

"ALV's waren ook zo'n dingetje. Die duurden ooit tot diep in de nacht, zes uur 's ochtends enzovoort. Dan had je polemiek om de polemiek. De sport om anderhalf uur te doen over het voorstel wel of geen frikandellen bestellen. En in een jaartje of drie, vier was dat klaar. Dan was het effectief vergaderen, voorstellen er doorheen rammen en op tijd naar bed."

Interviewee number 6

Interviewee number 6 was very involved with the identity of his student organization. Next to his board membership he was involved with a committee that prepared a document with a vision on the future. He assesses his period at the VGS Delft is very valuable, but he recognizes that he missed out on activities at his study organization because of his student organization.
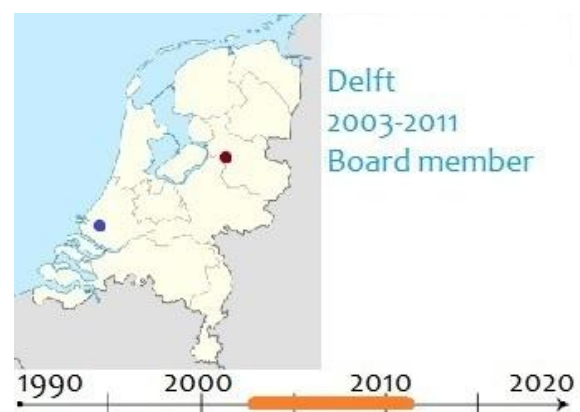
"De identiteit werd niet bepaald door een claim van bovenaf. Mensen werden onderling op identiteit gewezen en we waren altijd opzoek naar de onderlinge consensus, ook met die identiteitscommissie. Maar het document wat we daarmee opstelden was niet om op te leggen aan anderen. Het doel was het gesprek erover te hebben en daarmee vormde het zich."
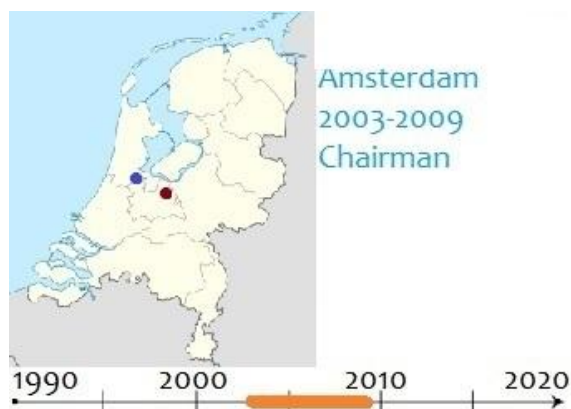
Interviewee number 7

Interviewee number 7 assessed the acquired contacts as most valuable in his student life. How people affiliate reciprocally is valuable for the rest of your life. He became chairman of the organization, but never reflected on himself as someone who set out the guidelines for the organization.

"De studentenvereniging is van zichzelf een hele conservatieve club, dat creëert een hoop waarborging. Gewoon doen wat je altijd doet, pochen met je eigen traditie, het feit dat iets traditie maakt het op zichzelf iets goeds, het wordt blijkbaar gewaardeerd. Je moet van goede huize komen wil je daar verandering in brengen. Tegelijk zie je sluipender wijs bezoekers bij lezingen en vakgroepen dalen, terwijl in de vorm van de vereniging alles hetzelfde is, wat is er dan veranderd?"

"Ondanks dat alle monden zouden zeggen dat het goed zou zijn om op alle activiteiten aanwezig te zijn, was het in de praktijk gewoon anders. Niemand die zei wat voor collectief we zouden moeten zijn. Ook voor mijn tijd waren er geen mensen die ons wezen op onze identiteit. Heel sluipenderwijs is dat gegaan."

Interviewee number 8

Interviewee number 8 describes himself as a very active member of his student organization. He was a member of the board for one year and values his student period a lot. He assesses the student organization as extremely forming because it opens people's eyes for subjects they normally would not choose.

"Ik denk dat er in verenigingsdiscussie altijd enorm sprake is van actie en reactie waardoor er altijd een zeker evenwicht blijft bestaan."

"Wat er vooral speelde, maar wat moeilijk te duiden is, is dat er verschillende stromingen waren. Een stroming hecht aan studentikoze benadering, borrelen, feesten, goede discussies houden, goede lezingen en bijbelstudies. Een andere stroming was meer gericht op bijbelstudie, onderlinge vorming, hechten aan het lidmaatschap van IFES."

Wageningen
2004-2010
Chairman

Interviewee number 9

Interviewee number 9 was the chairman of his student organization for a year and he was an active member for the rest of his student career. He also passed through a period of organization-wide reflection on identity what resulted in a vision based on organization-wide meetings. Interviewee number 9 thinks that student organization will always be reflecting to their vision, because they do not know where they aim for compared to professional organizations that do know what they reach for.

"Maar ik denk niet dat de scholieren die net student worden heel snel de vereniging zouden veranderen, als er niks gewaarborgd was. Heel veel mensen lijken me eerder geneigd te schikken naar wat er heerst. Daardoor hebben alle studentenverenigingen een soort neiging tot stabiliteit. Plus dat je vist uit een hele homogene vijver."

Interviewees number 10+11

Interviewees numbers 10 and 11 were simultaneously interviewed, what led to possibilities for multiple perspectives on the same story they lived through. Both were member of the student organizations' board en both are as old-member particularly involved with the wellbeing of the VGSR nowadays. Both interviewees were on the same page and continuously complemented each other, therefore their interview is considered as one and coded is one interview.
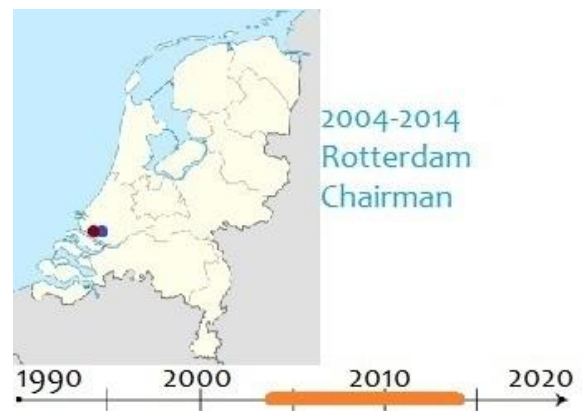
2004-2014
Rotterdam
Chairman

"Ik heb ook het idee dat vroeger de mensen wat uitgesprokener waren en dat het helemaal niet erg was als de helft van de vereniging daarnaar zat te kijken, dat autoritaire en hierarchische was wat normaler. Nu spreken de oudere leden zich wat minder uit, ze stellen zich wat minder nadrukkelijk op."
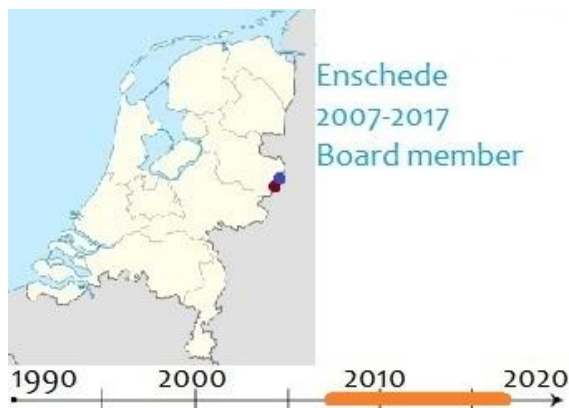
Interviewee number 12 did a board membership and was seated in multiple committees that were concerned with the loosening up the policy of requirements for becoming a member. He had a specific interest for the history of the world or 'pillar' his student organization comes from.

"Intellectualiteit gaat niet weg. Het is wel kwetsbaar. Er wordt altijd aan getrokken, maar er wordt ook terug getrokken."

"Maar ik weet wel dat dat vroeger veel meer benauwend was, dat idee heb ik wel. Themagroepverplichting was een discussie, is inmiddels afgeschaft. Zo'n formele sociale druk is gewoon benauwend."

Interviewee number 13

Interviewee number 13 called her study time a great experience. The student organization was a place for personal development that led to a formative experience. Her involvement in the organization was not in the form of a board membership, but in the form of seven years as a member. She indicates that the board did guide the organization in a certain identity. The pillars where the organization was build on were used to remind the members what their identity means. But from her perspective the pillars of

the organization did shift and seem to be uncontrollable, despite the efforts.
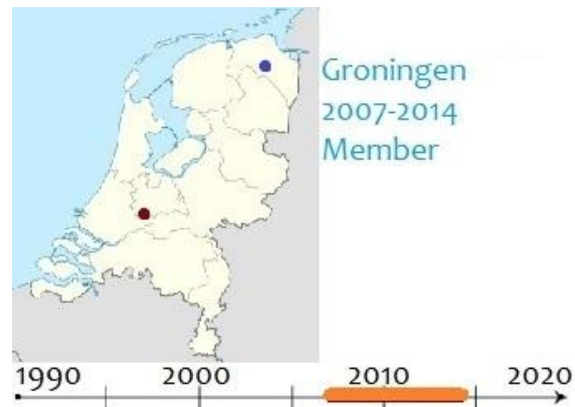
"Het bestuur het wel een duidelijk functie in het neerzetten van de identiteit. Bijvoorbeeld zoals een bestuur extra aandacht geeft aan lezingen. We hebben ook een jaar gehad met een pijlervierdaagse om de identiteit nogmaals duidelijk te maken."

"De pijlers verschuiven. Het intellectuele gaat omlaag, het sociale blijft, mensen lijken alleen nog maar voor de gezelligheid te komen."

Interviewee number 14 values the connection you gain, he values the distraction and recreation relative to you study, he values the formative aspect; socially and academically. Interviewee number 14 has always been involved in identity marking discussions. His student organizations could once be characterized by an 'active and geeky culture', but this developed into a more polarized organization where people are less homogeneous.

Enschede
2010-2018
Member

1990　　　2000　　　2010　　　2020
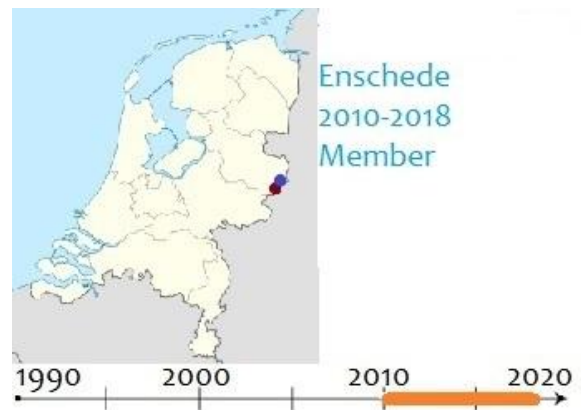
"Wat als mensen het doel niet meer willen volgen? Stel tachtig procent volgt het doel niet en twintig procent wel, maar die tachtig procent heeft niks tegen op het doel, dan kan het nog. Maar als een groot deel van de vereniging het doel ook niet meer wil volgen, dan moet je het denk ik gaan aanpassen. Als er ook geen hoop meer is op verbetering dat het doel wel nageleefd zal worden. Maar als er slechts een groep is die weinig bezig is met het doel van de vereniging, maar er niks op tegen heeft, dan faal je gewoon in je doel, maar heb je nog wel je doel."

Interviewee number 15

This last interviewee is the most unique interviewee in this research. This man never was a member of VGS-Nederland, but he is very involved in the current world of Christian students because of his directorship in IFES Nederland (International Fellowship of Evangelical Students); an organization that had a lot of impact on the identity of VGS-Nederland. The director of this organization is also a consultant and change manager in the world of business. This interviewee was not questioned about his student period, but about changing identities and managing identities in student organizations.

He claims that students are particularly challenged in keeping up an identity, because of the turnover time over their members. At the same time students are proficient in fulfilling this task, because they have a lot of experience and a lot of historical information. Interviewee number 15 is firmly in the tools an organization should use for maintaining identity. There is a need for a powerful transfer of desirable behavior.

"Een vereniging is gewoon een harnas, dus het is niet erg om mensen in een harnas te stoppen. Net als in een gezin heb je leefregels. Studentenverenigingen zijn veel te lief in het overbrengen van hun mores. Anders wordt je een grijze massa van iedereen die zijn eigen regeltjes volgt en heb je geen identiteit meer. Je moet duidelijk vertellen dat het belangrijk is voor de toekomst en het in leven houden van je vereniging. Er is een of andere doorgeslagen democratisering gekomen binnen studentenverenigingen die echt slecht is. Als iemand bij IFES zich niet zou willen houden aan de regels, die zeg ik: dan betaal ik toch tot vandaag jouw salaris, die ga je er maar uit. Het zijn de millenials die zich niks meer willen laten zeggen. Als je daaraan toegeeft besta je straks niet meer."