

Commodification of the countryside: a case study on tourism development in rural Limburg



“The ‘ideal countryside’ is perceived, above all, in terms of its contribution to the ‘quality of life’ for its beauty and attractiveness. (Frouws, 1998).”

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AI statement

In this thesis,

- AI was used for translation, and grammar checks by DeepL and ChatGPT.
- NotebookLM was used to find literature based on keyword search.
- ChatGPT was used to suggest variations on keywords to improve literature searches on Google Scholar and NotebookLM, to suggest and improve the structure of the text, and to brainstorm about a logical order of the sub-questions and subchapters.
- ChatGPT was used to create the image on the cover page of the thesis.

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As I am working on the finishing touches of this thesis, I think back on last summer, sitting in the library while the sun was shining, and thinking I would never be able to complete the work that is now in front of me. Since the beginning of this process, my supervisor emphasized that every student works at their own pace, and that's okay. I am grateful for having had such patient and comforting guidance over the months. At times, I had read my own words one too many times and confused myself by my own ideas. I would like to thank my supervisor for the uplifting words, which would leave me with a new dose of enthusiasm and motivation to continue in the direction I had chosen.

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Now, nearly having completed the thesis and looking back on when I first started, I wish I could tell myself, sitting in the library while the sun was shining: 'it wasn't all that bad', but I guess finding that out firsthand is what made the process worthwhile.

Executive summary

This thesis investigates how rural tourism reshapes the functions and the perceptions of the countryside. The starting point of the thesis is the visible impact that touristification has had on urban and coastal areas, where increasing tourism pressure causes dissatisfaction among the local population and generates a negative perception of the tourism sector. In contrast, rural tourism is a relatively new market, often promoted by local governments because of its economic benefits and its potential to increase the vitality and resilience of rural areas.

The research builds on the assumption that spaces are constructed through human interactions and discourses, a perspective incorporated into the theoretical foundation through the Production of Space theory. Interests and attitudes towards tourism development among the local community, the agricultural sector and the tourism sector were documented through the lens of the Growth Machine theory, providing an additional institutional perspective on power relations among actors.

Ultimately, this thesis contributes to the broader question of how tourism can be implemented considerately and in line with local values by regional organisations and policy makers.

The core of this thesis is a case study on the rural areas of Limburg, a province in the southeast of the Netherlands. Here, rural tourism is gaining popularity for its distinctive landscape elements, while the same landscape challenges farmers, who find an additional income stream in tourism.

The results showed that rural tourism has significantly influenced the functionality of the countryside, which changes the narratives, and ultimately the perception are held about rurality. Simultaneously, the countryside is actively being framed as a tourist attraction through storytelling and promotion, reinforcing the process of shifting functions and the understandings of rural spaces. Although tourism can generate a significant source of income, regional organisations in rural Limburg showed awareness of the pressure that tourism can place on the local community and actively seeks to maintain a balance between these dynamics. Clear communication, the encouragement of bottom-up initiatives and citizen participation contribute to the active involvement of locals, which creates support for further developments. These findings may inform the implementation of tourism development on the countryside elsewhere in rural parts of the Netherlands or abroad, helping to ensure alignment with local values and preservation of regional identities.

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1. Introduction

Tourism can have a significant impact on the design and planning of spaces. Coastal areas are marked by hotels, beach umbrellas, and swimming pools as symbols of landscapes crafted for tourists. The transformation of a space into a tourist destination is known as *touristification* – a process closely linked to gentrification, as it involves affluent consumers and visitors who have a significant impact on the social and physical changes of neighbourhoods (Cocóla-Gant, 2015). Taking examples from Spanish cities such as Barcelona and Palma de Mallorca, where residents have spoken up against growing levels of tourism, it has become evident that urban and coastal areas have started to become saturated with tourists (Ramis et al, 2020). Therefore, rural regions are emerging as alternative spaces for tourism expansion, creating opportunities for farmers to diversify their activities beyond food production (Romero et al., 2019).

In this context, rural tourism has gained popularity among tourists, especially those who value nature and quietness, and among farmers as a complementary source of income. Economic activity in rural areas is traditionally focused on agriculture, but tourism has strongly developed in the 21st century, opening a new market for activities that can positively contribute to the rural economy. Rural tourism comes in many forms, differing from the enjoyment of nature, culture, and heritage, to wellness and agrotourism (NBTC, 2023). Agrotourism lies at the intersection of tourism and agriculture and can take numerous forms, including rural accommodation, farm experiences, farm shops, gastronomic activities, workshops, and cultural events. Agrotourism has been developed more extensively in touristic areas such as the Mediterranean. For example, the countryside of the Spanish island of Mallorca is filled with luxury fincas and farms that sell an authentic rural experience (Almeida-Garcia, 2025).

This expansion of agricultural activities can be referred to as multifunctional agriculture, where farmers engage in activities beyond the production of food and raw materials. Agriculture was traditionally multifunctional, as it sustained rural communities, provided local employment, and protected biodiversity. Modernisation centralised industrial and large-scale farming in the agricultural sector. Recently, restrictions and changing societal expectations have brought multifunctionality back on the agenda as a solution to protect rural areas and communities. Increasingly, rural areas are repurposed into different functions, such as the provision of recreational and educational services, and the protection of cultural

heritage and landscapes (Mettepenningen et al., 2011). This can strengthen the resilience and liveability of rural areas and aligns with European policies, shifting away from the productivism paradigm. The EU promotes the diversification of agriculture and the sustainable growth of rural areas (Belligiano, 2020). The EU LEADER programme recognises tourism as an important tool for rural development and gives financial support to projects that aim to improve the liveability and economy of the countryside (LEADER Zuid-Limburg, 2023). Rural areas are increasingly valued as experiences, illustrating the shift towards a consumption-oriented countryside. As a form of multifunctional agriculture, tourism has the potential to stimulate regional development and the resilience of local communities (Mettepenningen et al., 2011).

1.1 Problem statement

Tourism development is often framed as an instrument for increasing rural vitality. However, studies indicate that a sudden increase in tourists can have a negative, gentrifying effect on the landscape, cultural heritage, and identity of a specific area (Lestegas, 2019). Research in the Mediterranean shows that tourism causes higher housing and land prices and seasonal dependence (Blazquez-Salmon, 2013). Moreover, a study on short-stays in the Mallorcan countryside reveals that touristification leads to a reshaping of the landscape (Almeida-Garcia, 2025). As tourists increasingly seek authentic experiences of local life, their presence has become deeply intertwined with the everyday lives of residents (Cetin & Bilgihan, 2016). The lifestyles and behaviours of tourists can bring changes to the neighbourhood's atmosphere and identity (Liang & Bao, 2015). This process of touristification can also change the attachment that residents have to a place, because changes to their physical environment can alter the meaning and values they associate with it (van Leeuwen, 2021).

The negative effects of urban and coastal touristification on the authenticity and maintenance of the local identity of a space are widely agreed upon (Almeida-Garcia, 2025; Mohamed et al., 2025). Rural tourism, however, is often framed as a development opportunity for the countryside, emphasizing the positive economic effects that its implementation might have. In contrast to touristification in urban and coastal areas, the impact of tourism in rural areas, remains underexplored, particularly in how it changes the function, narratives, and regional identity of the countryside. Therefore, it is important to explore if the development of tourism in rural areas follows the same mechanism as in an urban context, leading to negative effects on the sense of place attachment and identity of local communities of the countryside. In this process, agricultural spaces are re-designed and commodified for visitors into an idyllic

version of rurality, consequently changing the meaning that locals and tourists attach to an area.

1.2 Research aim and research questions

1.2.1 Research aim:

This thesis explores how rural tourism changes the use, experience, and representation of the rural space by local actors, based on the Production of Space and Growth Machine theory. Both theories were applied to the case of the countryside of Limburg, a site that has gained popularity among tourists and is actively promoted as a tourist-destination by the province of Limburg and other regional organisations (Provincie Limburg, 2022). The aim of this research is to explore how the development of tourism in rural areas in Limburg impacts their functionality and the perception of rurality, by exploring the way rural space is used, experienced and represented. Additionally, attention was paid to underlying power structures in decision-making among the different actors involved.

1.2.2 Research questions:

“To what extent does the development of rural tourism influence the functionality of rural spaces in Limburg and the way rurality is perceived?”

Subquestions:

1. What practices introduced by rural tourism influence the way the rural space is used?
2. How is the countryside of Limburg represented and promoted through rural tourism?
3. How do the changing functions of the countryside influence the creation of different narratives of rural Limburg?
4. How are different interests and power positions negotiated in the development of rural tourism in Limburg?

1.3 Scientific and societal relevance

1.3.1 Scientific relevance

This thesis aims to broaden the scope of touristification literature by focusing on rural areas. Touristification in rural areas has been studied to a limited extent. Most existing studies took place in villages in China and Scotland (Li, 2025; Bhandari et al., 2008; Stockdale et al, 2000). So far, most studies in the Netherlands have focused primarily on the potential of rural tourism, because of its economic benefits (NCBT, 2023a). This study aims to add an important nuance by highlighting the spatial, social, and cultural implications of tourism in rural areas, rather than its potential economic benefits. The focus on the sustainable and

considerate implementation of tourism development is particularly relevant for informing policies aimed at the responsible development of rural areas through tourism. The application of the ‘Growth Machine Theory’ and the ‘Production of Space’ theory in this research contributes to the development of the theory in rural areas, as they have mostly been applied to urban areas in previous literature (Almeida-Garcia, 2025; Agace, 2023). Combining these theories enables a meaningful analysis to identify actors’ interests in development and to understand the process of shifting functions of rural space, as well as diverging understandings of rurality among residents and visitors. Many scholars argue that the Production of Space theory is complex, and therefore it calls for the creative application to practical cases (Schmid, 2022). In doing so, this research contributes to the further development of the theory by bridging theoretical and empirical insights.

1.3.2 Societal relevance

The diversification of economic activity in rural areas is considered an important driver of development, as it serves as an additional stream of income for farming households (Belligiano et al., 2020). These initiatives might have positive consequences on the vitality of rural areas, as they stimulate local economic growth (Halfacree, 2018). However, the increasing demand for rural tourism requires careful and informed decision-making due to its sustainability and ethical implications, as tourism can also put pressure on the landscape and the community. Besides tourism, urbanisation and industrialisation form growing threats to the authenticity and biodiversity of rural spaces (Frouws, 1998). These upcoming challenges highlight the importance of understanding and monitoring the dynamics of developments in rural areas. Leaving tourism development to the market creates the risk of prioritising individual profit over collective good, undermining long-term social and ecological sustainability, which can lead to the commodification of the countryside (Blazquez Salom, 2013). Commodification is a process that can lead to exclusion, because it changes the original functions of the space along with the target audience (Trisia et al., 2024). Governments must be well informed about rural development for considerate decision-making regarding agricultural policy, spatial planning, and the protection of cultural heritage and the landscape.

The EU established the LEADER programme for the development of rural areas by creating economic opportunities and stronger communal ties and encouraging locals to use their knowledge and resources (Li, 2025). This development method is used to connect local actors

through Local Action Groups in decision-making and strategy-making. The LEADER initiative works with a bottom-up approach; locals are at the centre of determining the pathway of development for their region. Tourism can enable locals to realise rural development while maintaining regional identity, cultural values and community stewardship (European Commission, 2021).

In Limburg, the socio-cultural and natural values of the region are recognised by the LEADER programme as important factors to preserve for both locals and for the region's attractiveness to tourists (LEADER Zuid-Limburg, 2023). The board of the Province of Limburg emphasizes the broader social concern to care for the landscape because of its value to society. Strengthening natural and cultural elements can contribute positively to the wellbeing of residents and visitors. The landscape can also function as an instrument to address ecological challenges such as soil degradation, biodiversity, and drought. They argue that upcoming challenges in spatial planning might have a large impact on the landscape. The main goals for landscape preservation are to maintain and strengthen Limburg's qualities, diversity, and history while facilitating spatial developments (Provincie Limburg, 2022). New projects should be based on the region's qualities, with the aim of preserving natural and cultural elements, and promoting residents' and visitors' wellbeing (LEADER Zuid-Limburg, 2023). The growing popularity of leisure activities is a result of increased free time and strengthens the multifunctional nature of the countryside (Frouws, 1998). With limited space available, different functions of rural land compete for its use. This underlines the concern and importance of making well-considered decisions when it comes to land use planning.

This study enables informed and considerate management of Limburg's landscape, emphasizing the need to ensure that local communities and nature also benefit from tourism development. Highlighting the impacts of tourism development on the landscape and regional identity provides insight into how these impacts can be balanced against economic opportunities. This ultimately promotes inclusive rural development that benefits to all stakeholders involved.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1 Literature review

2.1.1 Touristification in urban and rural contexts

Touristification is the process of the spontaneous intensification of tourism in a certain region (Cornellia et al., 2024). It is also described as “a stage of touristic transformation in which a local space is transformed from its original state into a tourism-oriented environment” (Muselears, 2017, p. 12). The concept of touristification has its roots in gentrification studies, as it is sometimes described in literature as ‘tourism gentrification’.

Findings from gentrification studies can offer a foundation for understanding rural touristification. Urban gentrification is a well-known and well-researched phenomenon, whereas rural gentrification remains relatively unexplored (Alonso González, 2017). Some scholars argue that touristification is the consequence of spatial planning decisions of specific actors, and therefore it is not an abstract phenomenon. Ultimately, this could lead to the shift towards a tourism-based economy (Pickel-Chevalier, 2012). This is more likely in urban areas, and touristification is recognised as behaving differently in rural areas. Where urban tourist centres attract mass crowds, rural tourism attracts a smaller number of tourists. Because of the smaller capacity of the community, the impact can be significant, making rural areas more sensitive to changes driven by tourism (Butler, 2020). As rural development gains increasing attention in public and academic debates, understanding the consequences of these developments is important for evaluating the implications for rural economies, communities, and land-use.

Phillips (1993) is one of the leading authors in rural gentrification studies. He describes the characteristics of urban gentrification, how this concept can help us understand gentrification in rural areas, and where it differs depending on the area. Phillips argues that rural gentrification holds a critical perspective. It explains how newcomers reshape rural places socially, economically, and culturally, based on their class position and identity (Phillips, 2010). In research on the Mallorcan countryside, Blazquez-Salom (2013) explains how affluent urbanites cause financial commodification of the landscape, leading to a loss of use value and to social segregation as rural spaces are increasingly reserved for private use over public accessibility. This argument is supported by Smith & LeFaivre’s class theory, which is based on the idea that spatial development is profit-driven. Gentrification occurs when a rent gap arises, that is when the potential value of land under more profitable use exceeds the current ground rent, making it attractive for capital investment. This leads to a class-based inequality, where the division of space is decided by financially powerful actors (Smith & LeFaivre, 1984, pp. 43-64).

Although class theory has been widely applied to explain rural gentrification, there is disagreement among scholars about the central issue of rural gentrification. Some argue that it does not necessarily follow the exact same logic as urban gentrification because rural land is not traditionally used for residential purposes. Therefore, it does not have to lead to the displacement of working-class inhabitants (Blazquez-Salom, 2013). Instead, scholars suggest that rural gentrification is driven by lifestyle preferences and the desire for authenticity, making the loss of local identity a central issue (Ley, 1980; Jager, 1986).

Similar to gentrification, touristification can appear in both urban and rural areas. According to Gotham, tourism exposes spaces to different lifestyles and patterns of consumption, which ultimately leads to forms of displacement, and therefore tourism can be seen as a form of gentrification (Gotham, 2005). Others argue that the only similarity lies in the movement of residents as a result of new flows of people. A popular distinction that is argued for is the fact that touristification focuses more on the intensification of tourist activities, which can imply a loss of residents, while gentrification specifically describes the displacement of residents as a result of the permanent settlement of a new, affluent class (Cornellia et al., 2024). Generally, touristification is not limited to explaining a growing number of visitors. It can be defined as the transformation of a space from its original state towards a tourism-oriented environment through planning and the commodification of local assets. This transformation can affect socio-cultural, economic, and spatial structures (Muselears, 2017).

2.1.2 Commodification and authenticity

In the article ‘Authenticity and Commoditization in Tourism’, Cohen discusses how commodification can destroy the cultural meaning of things. New meanings can emerge or add to existing ones, a process that he calls ‘emergent authenticity’. Due to a lack of authenticity in modern society, tourists seek authentic cultural experiences outside urban contexts. According to Bhandari (2008), touristification turns culture into an aesthetic product for tourists, also known as the commodification of culture. Commodifying local culture destroys its authenticity, because it is altered to be a touristic attraction (Cohen, 1988). Castellazzi et al. (2023) point out that there is a fine line between promoting cultural heritage for tourism and commodifying it. Strategies must be developed to ensure that cultural practices are preserved and respected, rather than merely packaged for tourist consumption. These strategies can involve working with local artisans and cultural practitioners to create authentic experiences that reflect the true essence of the community.

Building on Cohen's perception of authenticity, MacCannell (1973) introduced the concept of 'staged authenticity': a cultural package created for the purpose of tourism. Authenticity is used as a key selling point in tourism, even though goods and services are often framed, staged or altered to attract buyers and visitors. MacCannell suggests that touristic activity in rural areas is usually not an unmediated encounter with rural life, but is adjusted to fit romanticised expectations of rurality, and mistakenly perceived by tourists as authentic. Cohen gives a nuanced view of this theory; he sees authenticity as a social construct that does not follow one single definition, which exists when people believe that something is authentic (Cohen, 1988).

Similar to the commodification of culture in tourism, rural tourism can cause the commodification of the landscape (Tonts and Grieve, 2002). The authors argue that this form of commodification may eventually lead to a process of creative destruction. The concept was introduced by Schumpeter (1934) and explains that capitalism has to destroy 'the old' to facilitate 'the new'. New ideas, products, and technologies quickly take over the role of their predecessors, leading to a constantly changing landscape. Schumpeter was positive about this process as it can lead to economic growth, but Harvey emphasizes that creative destruction leads to social inequalities (Tonts and Grieve, 2002). Besides the commodification of culture and landscape, Storey argues for the commodification of place: the identification of unique local elements to package, present and sell a place in a competitive visitor market (Storey, 2006). In the context of rural tourism, its development should be driven by careful consideration to prevent the landscape, culture, and identity from shaping towards the desires of tourists. It is important to note that commodification of culture and landscape can produce economic growth but could come at the expense of the needs and desires of local communities.

2.1.3 Multifunctionality of rural spaces

Commodification of the countryside through tourism is a relatively new concept. Some argue that the interest in rural tourism began out of a fear that the rural is disappearing with emerging industrialisation and urbanisation, which posed a threat to rural life and landscapes (Storey, 2006). Historically, farmers were primarily responsible for producing food; however structural pressures such as stricter regulations through environmental concerns, declining agricultural profits and limited permits increasingly forced farmers to take on multiple functions beyond food production (Mettepenningen, 2011). This created multifunctional rural

spaces, as they now generated public goods and services beneficial for the economy, society, and the environment in addition to the production of food and raw materials (Maris, 2021). This is especially relevant in Limburg, where the implementation of large-scale projects is difficult due to the physical features of the landscape.

According to a study on diverging visions of the countryside, Driessen (1995) explains that emerging socio-economic challenges led to the growing realisation that conventional large-scale, intensive and efficient agriculture would not provide a sustainable development path. High unemployment rates and a declining number of agribusinesses proved that agriculture could no longer support the rural economy. At the same time, emerging functions such as landscape maintenance, recreation and tourism, residential living, and infrastructure increasingly competed for the use of rural space alongside agriculture. These competing claims created tensions with intensive, industrial farming practices. In response, different perspectives on the future of the countryside emerged, seeking to find a balance between claims of rural space. In this context, regional qualities gained more appreciation within rural development strategies compared with a homogenous national model for rural spatial planning (Janssen & Lammers, 1999).

Driessen (1995) distinguished five types of ideal visions for the future of the countryside. The first vision is the suburb-countryside, which accommodates the growing pressure on urban spaces. This is in contrast with the park-countryside, where the maintenance of the landscape characteristics is central and recreation and nature are prioritised. The museum-countryside opposes changes to the functionality of rural spaces, aiming to keep the cultural and ecological elements intact. The modern-countryside strives for the development into a versatile region that offers space for multiple functions such as living, recreation, and economic activity. Lastly, the nature-countryside prioritises nature, and decentralises agriculture and economy so nature can develop. There is no space for intensive agriculture, large residential areas and industrial zones.

The five visions of the countryside illustrate that rural development is shaped by a convergence of interest, seeking to find a balance between agriculture, nature, recreation, and residential use. Regardless of the vision, tensions are inevitable because different actors compete for the use of space.

2.1.4 Land use conflict, sense of community and regional identity

The clashing visions of the ideal countryside can lead to conflicts. While some groups benefit from tourism-related development and rising land values, locals usually prioritise the use value of land for agricultural practices and liveability (Molotch, 1976).

A study on Mallorca showed that platforms like Airbnb have facilitated the shift from agricultural to touristic land-use. Simultaneously, the development of short-stay rentals has led to the displacement of agricultural land use. This caused a gradual decline of traditional agriculture and livestock activities (Almeida-Garcia, 2025). Canan & Hennessy (1989) studied the differing values of locals and elites on a small Hawaiian island. Their findings revealed a contrast between the two groups. Residents valued a sense of community, self-sufficiency, and local culture, while elites such as political actors and developers valued tourism development, economic growth, and rising land prices. Local culture was the selling point of tourism development, but the development itself poses a threat to the survival of that culture, because its commodification erodes its authenticity and undermines the traditional way of life that is meant to be presented to tourists.

Land-use can be driven by multiple actors with unequal degrees of power, making it important to map out differing interests and visions. Trisia et al. (2024) explain that rural tourism can remain inclusive, if visions for tourism align with those of residents. Exclusivity arises when rural communities desire change but are hindered by the preferences of tourists. In that case, local interests are excluded. Another driver for exclusion is commodification, a process through which things and activities are valued in terms of their price on the market as goods and services (Cohen, 1988). Commodification can change the original functions of the space in exchange for touristic functions (Trisia et al., 2024). The degree of commodification in rural areas can be a significant indicator of the exclusion of local communities.

Diverging visions for the future of land use can lead to conflicting interests, but shared interests can create a sense of community among residents (Molotch, 1976). A study on the city of Wuling Yuan in China by Li et al. (2023) showed that sense of place, or regional identity, is not homogenous and static. The meaning that locals give to a place is influenced by changes over time. The central concept, “sense of place” is the understanding of how people relate to their living environment. This includes aesthetic, cultural, historical, emotional, material, spiritual, and natural values that people hold for specific locations. Tourism development has made a significant impact on local people, which led to a mismatch

between the traditional place meaning and the current place meaning for locals. Landscape values shifted from agricultural to tourism-oriented purposes. In general, the values mostly shifted from traditional, spiritual ones to functional values. The government's promotion of tourism led to a decline in traditional agricultural livelihoods. People in this region were no longer active in agriculture but found employment in souvenir shops and restaurants. Cultural resources were commodified to attract visitors, which turned culture into an economic instrument. Overall, strengthening of the tourism sector can lead to institutional changes and have a social, economic and cultural impact, which can have a significant influence on people's place meanings (Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2015). Tian et al. (2023) add that touristification leads to social impacts on local communities, such as commodification of local culture, displacement, and elite capture, where elites control decision-making that primarily benefits themselves.

Based on a study on a touristic Finnish village, Kulusjärvi (2020) advocates for dialogical everyday politics, a form of engaged pluralism where different actors communicate and recognise each other's perspectives. The goal is not to reach full agreement, but to increase mutual understanding to create socially just and sustainable tourism. Li et al. (2023) agree that development of rural areas should be managed through collaboration, where the needs and values of locals are regularly considered in decision-making and landscape planning. The empowerment of local communities in tourism requires a shift in decision-making power from actors such as government, companies and investors to locals, a process also known as the devolution of power. This is difficult in a profit-driven industry, because financial returns are often prioritised over the interests of local people. Another challenge lies in the equal distribution of power among communities, as some individuals might have more access to it than others. This means that community participation in tourism requires both structural and social change. Locals need to develop bargaining power and awareness of their rights to participate in order to facilitate meaningful bottom-up decision-making (Tian et al., 2023).

2.1.5 The rural idyll

Beyond spatial land-use conflicts and institutional power relations, rural transformation also occurs at a symbolic level. The way the countryside is represented can be traced through

language use, visualisations, and meaning giving to rural spaces. An indicator of symbolic and representational changes over time can be found in art. Research shows that paintings reflect and reinforce an idealised vision of the countryside. It is valued for its existence outside of the urban sphere, praised for its calmness, orderliness, and cultural heritage and strongly connected to national pride (Koppert, 2011). Over time, the focus in art moved from portraying the landscape as a visual object to presenting the landscape as an experience. Koppert explains that this can be attributed to the development of infrastructure, making rural spaces more accessible, opening them up to the public.

In a study on the Dutch perspective on the countryside, van Dam et al. (2002) explain the development of its changing image. While in the UK the countryside was associated with the beauty of the landscape and a certain rural idyll that represented happiness, health, a strong sense of community and a slow-paced lifestyle, the Dutch considered the countryside purely functional. It was therefore planned to be a place of production in the agricultural sector. Since the 1980s, the Dutch view of the countryside has changed significantly, partly due to the decreasing positive image of agriculture, which is nowadays strongly associated with environmental issues. Rising welfare, better infrastructure, and mobility led to an increasing accessibility of remote areas. This opened the door for more recreation and rural living, leading to a rural image similar to the image held in the UK (De Haan, 2001). The image of rurality can differ depending on multiple factors, such as familiarity. Van Dam et al. (2002) describe the three most important types of aspects that influence people's rural image: the visual characteristics, the functional aspects and the socio-cultural aspects such as norms and values. The study concludes that most people have a positive image of the countryside, even reflecting the idea of a rural idyll. Building on van Dam's argument, Cloke states that people are starting to imagine or represent the countryside in a more abstract and idyllic way. He argues that the meaning that people give to the concept of rurality is becoming detached from their geographical spaces. He identifies an emerging gap between imagined rurality and real rural life. The socio-cultural construction of rurality is influential on the actual lived experiences and practices in these spaces. In the past, the image of rural life was based on lived experiences, but nowadays this image is increasingly shaped by the cultural meanings and expectations that people have about rurality, creating the idea of an 'imagined rurality' (Cloke, 2009).

Cloke (1992) also presented the idea that the countryside is shifting from a place of production to a place of consumption. He criticised this by making the comparison of the countryside to a theme park, with leisure, tourism and aesthetics as the main purposes of the use of space. The economic driver of this change is agricultural decline, which leads to a decline in job opportunities and pushes the countryside to find new ways to survive. This goes hand in hand with the growing interest in spending more time in nature, leading to a growing demand for rural tourism. This contributes to the restructuring of rural economies and identities, leading to issues including those of authenticity and dissonance (Storey, 2006). Storey bases his argument on the promotion of heritage as a tool for economic development. Local governments package and promote the uniqueness of the offer of rurality, based on culture, values, landscapes or local events. Promotional strategies can include selling a romanticised version of the countryside. Storey (2006) is critical of the commodification of heritage and emphasizes the importance of examining the underlying power structures to discover what story is being told, who is included, and who is excluded. The promotion of heritage with the aim of entertaining tourists creates tensions, because it might ignore the hardships of rural life, selling only a romanticised version of reality. Massey (2005, pp. 20-30) adds that idyllic rurality can create the impression that the rural is a canvas that can be used by visitors, through which capital and products flow to realize their perception of rurality, in which people and culture are simply objective entities existing on this 'surface'. This static view ignores the complexity of the constant interactions and changes that shape rural areas. Trisia et al. (2024) argue that the concept of rurality in rural tourism should be studied as something dynamic, not as an idyllic backdrop. The authors conclude that rurality is often portrayed positively, while concealing its underlying problems.

2.1.6 Rural tourism

The increasingly multifunctional use of rural land, combined with the growing appreciation of rurality and the emergence of a rural idyll, may contributed to the interest in rural tourism. The concept of rural tourism has mainly been studied from the perspective of tourists (Pesonen et al., 2011). While rural tourism is generally understood as leisure trips to places in rural settings, Kaaristo (2014) adds that it stems from a wish to escape the city and the desire to strengthen one's sense of identity outside of the urban sphere. It is also motivated out of the interest to participate in non-urban activities (Pesonen et al., 2011).

Leco et al. (2013) explain that rural tourism holds a strong environmental component. Tourists that are interested in the rural lifestyle often seek a more authentic and personal

experience. Rural tourism specifically interests people who desire to feel a strong connection to nature, because of the integration of farming practices and contact with farmers, which additionally provides for an educational experience. On the demand side, consumers are becoming more conscious of their choices and seek a story behind their purchases. Conscious consumers look for an experience that brings them closer to the source of products and to the rural lifestyle. They value authenticity and are interested in the stories behind products. This has contributed to the growing popularity of rural tourism (NBTC, 2023).

A popular form of rural tourism is agrotourism. This builds on the idea that farmers can fulfil multiple roles, including social and ecological functions. Farmers contribute to environmental objectives, maintain the landscape, provide socio-cultural values, and educational services. A study on the self-identification of farmers showed that most feel their role is a combination of that of an agrarian and an entrepreneur. Farmers who are active in agrotourism have a stronger sense that they fulfil a societal and educational role that restores the understanding between farmers and urbanites (Maris, 2021). Agrotourism has been assigned a significant role in strengthening rural regions as a complementary stream of income in addition to traditional rural economic activities, but also to allow communities to use their natural resources, culture, and traditions as assets to attract visitors (Banu, 2024). Agrotourism promotes local engagement, increases local spending, and strengthens the sustainability of the area. The development of employment opportunities leads to an improvement in the quality of life on the countryside (Krishna, 2020).

The value of the multifunctionality of rural areas has been recognised by the EU and is supported through subsidies, for example by supporting farming practices with positive externalities such as those that aim to be environmentally friendly (Baena Escudero, 2012). Agricultural activities can contribute to the preservation of rural heritage and biodiversity, the creation of opportunities for employment in rural areas, and the management of landscapes. Rural areas have started to shift their functionality beyond agriculture, to make room for recreation and residential living. The rural community is separating from agricultural production, and therefore its identity is no longer based solely on farming (Pinto-Correia & Breman, 2007).

The challenges for tourism development in rural areas are a lack of community engagement and over-tourism. It is important to ensure the protection of culture instead of reducing it to a tourist attraction, as the commodification of rural space and culture can lead to weaker

cultural authenticity (Castellazzi et al., 2023). Li (2025) emphasizes the importance of community engagement and social capital as instruments to protect cultural heritage in rural areas from tourism commodification because it gives locals a sense of ownership and creates alignment between the values and needs of locals and tourism development. Agace (2023) also argues for the importance of a strong local community in his case study on a touristic Swedish village, where the commodification of cultural and natural elements occurs via tourism. He concludes that rural areas are fragile and demand thoughtful planning when it comes to the development of tourism.

2.2 Theoretical framework

The central theory in this thesis is the Production of Space theory by Lefebvre, complemented by the Growth Machine theory by Molotch. The theory of Lefebvre (1991) centres around the idea that space is a product of human interactions with it, through everyday use, meaning-making and experiences. With an emphasis on discourse, the theory has a conceptual focus. Molotch (1976) highlights the role of the uneven distribution of power among actors in shaping a space, showing how development can benefit elites and marginalize local communities. The theory focuses more on empirical and institutional behaviour, particularly in political and economic interests that drive spatial development. Both theories take different approaches to understand the way spaces are planned and transformed but overlap in the view that space is not neutral, and is shaped by different social interactions and practices.

2.2.1 The Growth Machine Theory

The Growth Machine theory allows for an understanding of the context in which the social construction of space is produced. This theory explains how development is driven by local elites such as governments, real estate developers and businesses, who profit from rising market values. This might lead to a conflict of interest, because the public does not profit equally from this growth. Local economic development leads to a decline in use value, because it might cause disturbances in safety, quietness, and convenience (Molotch, 1976). Economic development can also lead to social inequality, displacement, environmental degradation, and loss of community identity. Residents might have a positive attitude towards local economic development if the rising market value benefits them too but generally have more concerns about the liveability of their environment (Deller, 1997). The theory focuses on the power structures behind the prioritization of market value over use-value.

In relation to rural tourism, its development might lead to local economic development, which increases the market value of the area. This is positively perceived by local groups such as business owners and local governmental groups, because it aligns with their local interest. Residents often account for social and environmental costs of local developments, while having limited influence over policy decision. Additionally, they might fear for a loss of their desired rural lifestyle, characterised by tranquillity, access to space and the overall quality of life, because economic development has a negative effect on the use-value of the area. If residents benefit from economic development, for example through the improvements to infrastructure, their attitude may become more positive. (Deller, 1997).

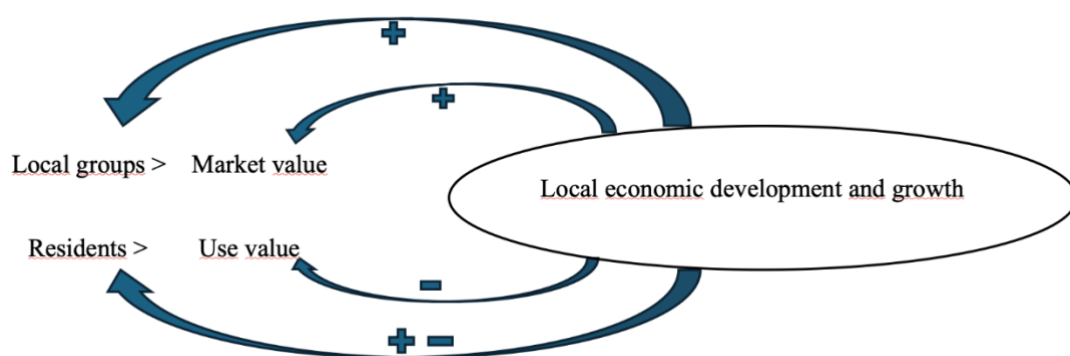


Figure 1. The growth machine, authors own elaboration

The focus of the political issue in this theory is the unequal use of and access to land, and the conflicting beliefs about its purpose (Molotch, 1976). Development can have different meanings and consequences for different people. This theory offers insights into the power structures and interests that drive development and form policy design. Growth machine theory has been used to study tourism in urban areas, while its application to rural areas remains underexplored. Canan & Hennessy (1989) expanded the scope of the theory by applying it to a case study on the Hawaiian island of Moloka’I, a rural space that experienced the erosion of the local culture as a result of resort development. Findings of this study showed that the state is mostly in favour of tourism development, while local residents favour agricultural development. The traditional values cherished by residents, which are linked to agriculture and sustainability, clash fundamentally with that of the urban elite. The authors conclude that land is of great economic importance as a resource, and the competition for its use is a force for political action. As elites strive for growth, antigrowth coalitions will develop as a reaction, because growth only benefits a small proportion of the community, leading to dissatisfaction and tensions.

2.2.2 The production of space

The 'production of space' theory by French Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre presents a critical perspective on how space is shaped within capitalist systems. He argues that political and economic forces produce everyday spatial practices (Rönnlund & Tollefsen, 2016). The production of space is embedded in Marxist theory, but Lefebvre adds the nuance of everyday social and cultural life in addition to the central themes of labour and capital. He argues that space is constructed through human experiences. Space is an active product of social relations, interactions, and power structures, and is shaped by not only political and economic, but also cultural and historical processes. It is shaped by society and reflects the dominant ideologies and practices of its time (Lefebvre, 1991).

Lefebvre distinguishes three dimensions of space, which together form the 'spatial triad', the first of which is spatial practice, or the lived space. This refers to the physical space around us, which appears as roads, farms, and buildings, reflecting how space is organised and used in everyday life. It includes every movement of spatial practice, which is expressed through residents' everyday activities, and extended by the movements of tourists, although these can't be considered everyday activities to the same extent as those of locals, because they are temporary. The second dimension of space is the representation of space, or the conceived space, which describes how a space is planned, designed, and controlled. In this dimension, power structures can play out, as space can be organised in a way that it excludes some, and favours others. This dimension can be found in images, signs, planning and communication. The idea that rural space is planned, imagined and promoted as a tourist destination is an example of the representation of space, because it reflects the envisioned space, which is shaped by different actors' negotiations on behalf of their interest. The last dimension is the representational space, or the lived space, which is shaped by symbols, emotions, lived experiences and people's attachment to a space (Lefebvre, 1991).

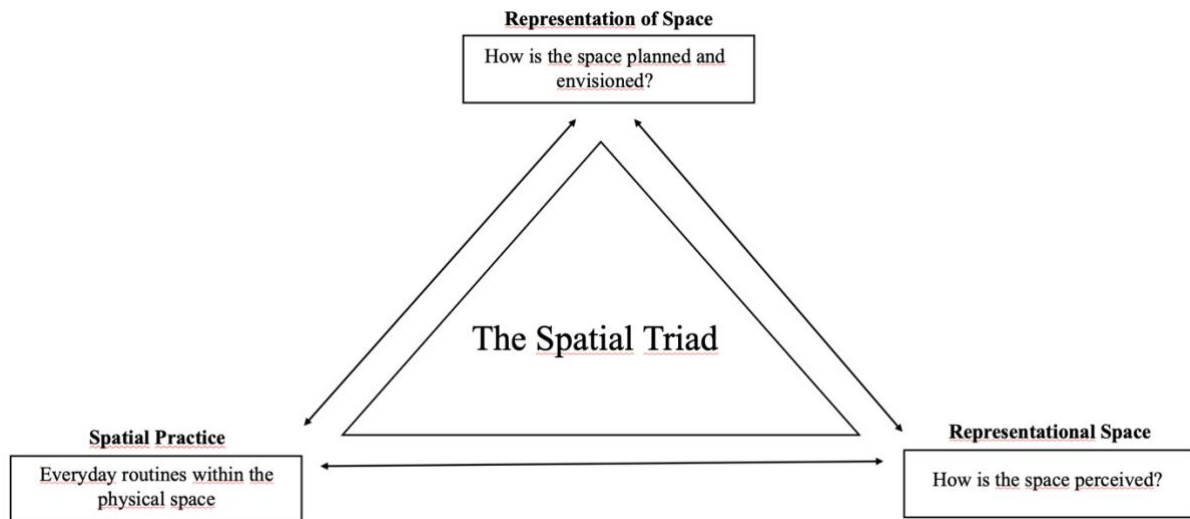


Figure 2. The spatial Triad

Through this framework, Lefebvre shows how space is not neutral. It is always contested, shaped by struggles between different social groups with conflicting interests. In capitalist societies, space is increasingly commodified, reorganised for profit, often at the expense of marginalized communities. This theory is particularly useful for analysing how rural landscapes are transformed, for instance, when land is redesigned for tourism or high-end consumption. It offers the ability to unravel the relation between the imagination of the ideal rural lifestyle and the physical organisation of the countryside. This gives meaning to the power dynamics behind spatial changes, including those whose interests are served and those who are disadvantaged in the process of rural development (Lefebvre, 1991). Agace (2024) used this theory in a case study on a Swedish village that attracts a large number of visitors every year. In the article, he argues that the spatial triad allows us to identify characteristics of a physical space, but also to understand the space on a deeper level, highlighting attached emotions, symbols and historical elements that are found in each space. He concludes that the development of rural space is a fragile process, and it requires a considerate approach in order to ensure the maintenance of social space for both locals and tourists. Lefebvre's spatial triad can serve as an analytical tool for planners and local organisations to think critically about the planning of rural public spaces in touristic locations (Agace, 2024).

2.3 Operationalisation

2.3.1 Touristification

Touristification explains how a local space can transform into a tourism-oriented environment and, in doing so, it describes the impact of tourism on society and the landscape

(Almeida-Garcia, 2025). More specifically, it is a process in which a space shifts from its original function into a 'tourist-performed' state, meaning everyday practices move towards the needs and expectations of visitors (Muselears, 2017). Characteristics of touristification can be found in the development of activities, accommodation and productions aimed at tourists. Typical negative impacts of touristification are overcrowding, environmental problems, and rising rent (Woo et al., 2021). Touristification can be researched from many perspectives, including cultural and symbolic dimensions, but also economic and territorial ones (Bhandari, 2008; Almeida-Garcia, 2025). This thesis adopts a socio-cultural perspective on tourism, while also addressing issues of spatial planning, as the aim is to examine the impact on the use, representation, and perception of the countryside.

To measure this process, touristification in rural spaces is operationalised as observable changes in the form of the introduction of tourism-oriented accommodation, services, and products, the shifting function of agricultural land, and shifting experiences for residents and visitors in relation to the rural space. Furthermore, it is important to understand who the space is organised for, and if this includes or excludes certain groups.

2.3.2 Multifunctionality of rural spaces

Multifunctionality of a space is measured by the multiple uses that it serves to different parties, such as agricultural production, tourism, residential living, and recreational use. Multifunctionality is characterised by the coexistence and interaction of these different functions in one space. This is mapped by exploring the different uses of rural spaces that have emerged over time, and the actors involved, but also the different narratives about rural space that follow from people's attachment to and experience of a space. This makes the research not only based on the physical use of space, but also on the different meanings that the countryside can have for different people. Attention was also paid to the conflicts that can arise between different claims over the use of space.

It should be noted that multifunctionality is not limited to tourism-oriented functions, but in this thesis, the emphasis lies on the impact of tourism on the changing functions of the countryside. Examples of other functions of the countryside are social care farms or the accommodation of industrial functions, such as the production of wind and solar energy (Sociaal-Economische Raad, 2005).

2.3.3 Rural tourism and agrotourism

Rural tourism differs from urban tourism as it is located in rural settings, outside of cities and conventional tourist centres, often promoted as an escape from the urban environment. It has a traditional character, aimed at experiencing local traditions and connecting with nature. Besides the enjoyment of nature, rural tourism can also include sports- and adventure-, and wellbeing-related activities, or simply activities with the purpose of visiting friends and family. This makes rural tourism not purely a quest for an idyllic rurality (Trisia et al., 2024). According to Ana (2017), rural tourism takes place in rural areas and in rural communities. Businesses are usually small, family-owned establishments. Consumers of rural tourism are mostly interested in spending time in nature.

Philips et al. (2010) argue that many terms with similar definitions are used interchangeably with agrotourism, such as agritourism, farm tourism and rural tourism. In this thesis, however, agrotourism is considered a subcategory of rural tourism, as rural tourism refers to all touristic activities outside of urban spheres, while agrotourism refers to activities that take place on farms, offered by people who are employed in agriculture. Agrotourism refers to activities in rural areas with the purpose of attracting visitors to participate in agricultural practices such as harvesting or learning about farming techniques. This may include farm stays, tours and culinary experiences that allow visitors to experience and learn about rural life (Philips et al., 2010).

Agrotourism is commonly classified into three categories, the first of which is accommodation-based recreation. This includes group accommodations, B&Bs and camping sites connected to farms. The second category is day activities such as excursions, tastings and outdoor activities. The third involves farm sales, which are usually organised in short supply chains and focus on regional and sustainable products. In Limburg, farm sales is the most popular category of agrotourism. The interests of consumers of agrotourism lie typically in farming, crafting, natural products and gastronomy (LTO, 2024).

2.3.4 Commodification and authenticity

Commodification is a process in which objects, spaces or cultural practices become valued by their market value. In rural areas, this means that the landscape and culture are packaged into goods, services and experiences for tourists (Urry, 1995; Storey 2006). To do so, the place is promoted by the unique characteristics of the landscape and culture, which are identified as resources to distinguish the place from other areas (Storey, 2006). In rural tourism, valuable characteristics include quietness, nature, storytelling, and local production because this is

what consumers seek in the countryside. Commodification in rural areas can be recognised by the promotion of culture, heritage and landscape characteristics.

Commodification can be observed through the promotion of the landscape and culture for tourism, marketing local products as 'authentic' and modifying spaces and practices for tourist consumption.

2.3.5 Perceptions of rurality

Perception of rurality refers to the meaning, image and qualities that people assign to the countryside. These perceptions are constructed through representations, experiences and everyday practices. Rurality is both imaginative and material. It acts as a counterpart to life in the city. Cloke (2009) argues that the concept of rurality is separating from a geographical space into an imaginative space, associated with different cultural meanings. Simultaneously, it is material as a desired lifestyle or a place to move to, to experience, or live in. The idealised rural lifestyle is a concept that consumers seek through products, activities and stays. In summary, rurality or the rural lifestyle is made up of meaning, perceptions and images as a social construct. But it also consists of practices, traditions and use of space.

This concept is operationalized by examining the qualities that people assign to rurality through their personal connection to rural spaces, communities and traditions. Language uses in promotional material and policy documents also serve to illustrate dominant narratives about rurality.

2.3.6 Regional identity

Regional identity can consist of many elements such as the economy, culture, geographical features, climate and language. It is considered a container concept, because it is broadly defined and poorly demarcated. According to Mettepenningen et al. (2011) the constructivist perspective would define regional identity as subjective, manipulated and shaped by power dynamics. Discourse is essential in constructionism, meaning concepts are negotiated through diverging interpretations. Different people can have different ideas about the conceptualisation of regional identity. It is a socially constructed concept, because its meaning is formed through social interactions. New interpretations and narratives can reshape the understanding of identity over time. The dominant narrative is decided through power dynamics, which causes the inclusion of the dominant, and the exclusion of marginalised voices.

Since regional identity is a layered and dynamic concept, it is operationalised based on the connection that people feel to their living environment. This can be based on multiple elements, such as the physical features, the social cohesion that they sense in their community, or the sense of pride they experience.

2.3.7 The spatial triad

This thesis is structured by the Production of Space theory by Lefebvre, which indicates three dimensions of space that together form the spatial triad. Different points of reference were chosen for each dimension, the first of which is spatial practice. This can be recognised in the everyday use of space, the routines that different actors perform in the space, and the division of space. The second dimension is the representation of space, characterised by how the space is envisioned in the promotion of spaces, but also in the planning or organisation of a space, meaning this dimension is usually carried out by local governments and local businesses. The last dimension is the representational space, which explains the lived experiences, memories and attachments that people have to a space, formed through social and cultural characteristics that tell stories of the history and identity of a space.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research strategy

This research has a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is suitable because it allows for an in-depth understanding of the interaction of different actors with their surroundings and captures actors' interpretations. The research method used is a case study of the countryside of Limburg. A qualitative case study method provides the opportunity to study complex phenomena within their context (Baxter & Jack, 2008). A case study is relevant when it is necessary to cover contextual conditions. This is especially helpful when it is not fully clear where the boundaries lie between the phenomenon and its context. While case studies can help generalise theoretical propositions, results should not be considered universally applicable as they are context-specific (Yin, 2003). Baxter & Jack (2008) differentiate multiple types of case studies based on the aim of the research. The most suitable case study for this research is a descriptive case study, because of its ability to understand an intervention or phenomenon and the real-life context in which it occurred (Yin, 2003). As tourism development is deeply connected with, and dependent on, the environment in which it operates, it requires an examination of multiple dimensions such as social, spatial and cultural factors within Limburg's countryside.

3.2 Research methods

This study is based on a mixed-methods approach, making use of both primary and secondary data to establish a deep understanding of the dynamics of tourism development in rural areas, to ensure the validity of the research findings. The first part of the research was conducted through a literature review of research papers and policy documents to identify key concepts, actors, and gaps in existing literature. Subsequently, data was retrieved from locals, planners and promoters of tourism to allow for the perspectives of different actors. This allows for triangulation, the addition of alternate perspectives to challenge or validate existing findings (Turner & Turner, 2009). Although triangulation can create a fuller picture, Fielding & Fielding (1986) argue that outcomes cannot be adopted as an objective truth, as it does not reproduce facts. Still, it increases credibility, compensates for weaknesses in the data, and reduces blind spots.

The research was structured by two complementary theories, which have been discussed in the theoretical framework. Insights from these theories provided the observable points of reference that structured the interview questions. The Production of Space theory was used to create an overview in the way rural areas are used, promoted, and perceived. The first three sub-questions align with the spatial triad mentioned by Lefebvre, which consists of the conceived, perceived and lived space. In addition, the Growth Machine theory was used to identify actors' economic and political interests and inter-actor power relations. This is explored in the final sub question, with the purpose of visualising the conflicting or aligning interests in rural tourism development. This framework supports an understanding of the impact of tourism on the changing functions of the countryside, and the perception of rurality through changing narratives.

3.2.1 Data collection

Primary data

Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews, conducted among residents and organisations. Residents were chosen based on their living environment, and on the match of the participant profile with the identified key stakeholders. The organisations were chosen for their insights from different perspectives, representing local communities, the tourism sector and farmers. This allowed for a wide range of valuable responses, with selection based on theoretical sampling.

The flexibility and spontaneity of semi-structured interviews leave room for respondents to share knowledge in addition to priorly established knowledge of the researcher, forming a rich set of data. This is especially helpful when consulting organisations to share their knowledge and approach in tourism development. The limitation of interviews lie in the fact that respondents report on their own behaviour, making it unsuitable for an objective observation of the respondent in their context (Karatsareas, 2022). Since this research focuses on lived experiences and narratives, interviews are a valuable method for the collection of data, allowing respondents to express their attitude in their own language. Edley & Litosseliti (2010) argue that interviews can empower respondents because it gives them the opportunity to shape the conversation in the direction that they deem important.

The residential interviews were structured based on different elements, starting with questions on personal background and the personal connection that respondents felt to their living environment. Following this, respondents were asked to describe their environment visually and socially, asking specifically for places they felt a strong connection with or in which they experience fond memories. The interview then continued to the subject of tourism, asking for personal experiences in positive or negative ways, and its interference with their daily lives. To conclude, respondents were asked to what extent they felt like they could influence the decision-making process in their area when it comes to the environmental planning of the municipality. These questions allowed for different perspectives, personal stories and for a visualisation of the environment.

The interviews with regional organisations started out similarly, asking respondents for their personal background and connection to the environment. These were followed by organisational questions, specifically on the mission, approach, responsibilities, and network of the organisation. Based on the daily tasks within the organisation, questions were asked about their vision on tourism in Limburg, highlighting positive and negative aspects for different actors, and their desired future direction of the sector.

Secondary data

Secondary data was collected from promotional materials of tourism platforms and individual businesses in Limburg. These have mostly been found through platforms for accommodations, activities and shops, but also by searching for keywords including ‘tourism Limburg’, farm shops, camping sites and farm stays. Secondary data was also collected from

policy documents such as policy visions and regional planning reports, most of which were recommended by policy makers and other interviewed respondents.

	The spatial triad			
	Spatial practice	Representation of space	Representational space	Growth Machine theory
Points of reference:	How is the space used in an everyday context? What daily routines take place in the space? How is the use of space divided?	What are the visions for the space? How is the space promoted to tourists?	What memories and experiences are attached to the space? What are the cultural and social characteristics?	What are the power relations between actors? Do actors have interest in market value or use value?
Data collection:	Semi-structured interviews locals+regional organisations	Content analysis + regional organization interviews	Semi-structured interviews locals	Data combined
Sub-question:	1	2	3	4

Figure 3. Theory and data collection

3.3 Validity and reliability of the research

Although some scholars argue that validity and reliability are terms are primarily associated with quantitative research (Noble & Smith, 2025; Golafshani, 2003), we can understand them in a broad context for its applicability to qualitative research. Validity refers to the precision with which the findings reflect the data. To establish validity, and therefore the representation of the real world in this research, the research is based on multiple data methods. Using multiple methods can be beneficial for the validity of research (Denscombe, 2003).

Reliability refers to consistency of the analytical procedures. Here, it is important to consider that personal biases may influence outcomes. Therefore, reliability can be increased by reflecting on personal biases (Noble & Smith, 2025).

3.4 Research philosophy:

Research philosophy can be understood in two branches: ontology and epistemology (Moon & Blackman, 2014). Ontology is the study of being, therefore it studies the nature of reality or existence. Epistemology refers to all that we know and how we know it.

Guba & Lincoln argue that claims about reality should be made with the widest possible critical examination (1994). The ontological approach of this research is critical realism, because it explores the meaning of space through socially constructed interpretations.

Constructionists believe that meaning comes into existence through our engagement with the world (Moon & Blackman, 2014). Constructionism is therefore the relevant epistemology in

this research, because it aligns with the theory that space is produced through social interactions, power dynamics, and cultural practices (Lefebvre, 1991). Concepts are constructed through discourse, through sharing ideas, language and narratives, depending on who is speaking, in what context and at what time. Discourse not only describes reality, but also actively shapes it. The concepts are given meaning through the way they are understood and talked about by people, institutions and organisations. This will eventually influence not only what people say, but also what they do, which translates back into our everyday behaviour, and even in policy (Halfacree, 1995). Discourse provides a social representation through which people understand and explain their social and physical environment (Frouws, 1998).

This thesis finds a strong foundation in critical realism and constructionism, as it builds on the idea that spaces are given meaning through the perceptions and interactions of the people that engage with them. The identity of a space is therefore not static, but constantly in motion. Tourism can impact spaces by shifting their functions and narratives, which reshapes their identity because it attracts new actors who may perceive the space in different ways than locals (Bhandari, 2008).

3.5 Case selection

The countryside of Limburg was selected as the case study for this research. Limburg is a province located in the southeast of the Netherlands. Traditionally, it has been agricultural space, characterised by meadows, farms and cultivated land. Nowadays, it is gaining popularity as a tourist destination because of its unique landscape, spacious, green rural areas, culture and history. De Grip (2013) emphasizes the potential of rural Limburg to grow its tourism sector as a source of economic growth, because Limburg has high rates of employment in the agricultural sector, especially in the North of the province where agricultural employment is five times the national average. The potential for the growth of new sectors also springs from the declining number of operating farms, and the expanding multifunctionality of rural areas in Limburg. Multifunctionality of the countryside is seen as an opportunity for growth in a landscape that creates difficulties for development projects on a larger scale (LLTB, 2012). According to research by Wageningen University, profits from multifunctional agriculture increased by two thirds to 1.6 billion euros between 2020 and 2023 (van der Meulen, 2025).

As part of the multifunctional rural space, tourism is promoted by the national government as a promising instrument for the vitality and liveability of rural areas in the Netherlands. It is important that tourism developments benefit all stakeholders. This is adopted in the national mission of 2030 for destination management in the Netherlands (NBTC, 2023a). Concerns lie mostly in the quality of tourism activities, which are desirably aligned with the character, identity and story of the area. Rural tourism should complement the areas by being part of its holistic development to ensure the conservation of authenticity, cultural heritage, and natural landscape qualities (Province Limburg, 2022).

Different organisations see the potential of Limburg as the agrotouristic centre of the Netherlands. Half of all farmers are expected to operate a multifunctional agribusiness in the future (NBTC, 2023a). To achieve this goal, the Limburgse Land- en Tuinbouwbond (LLTB) and Limburg Marketing en Coöperatie Platform Agrotourisme are committed to supporting farmers and business owners by connecting and informing them about the potential of agrotourism (LLTB, 2024). So far, the efforts to develop the sector have resulted in different initiatives, such as farm routes, tours and packages. The overarching objective of cooperation is the development of the region (NBTC, 2023a).

The Province of Limburg (2023) also recognises tourism in rural areas as an important factor for its development. Future plans for rural tourism in Limburg follow recommendations by The Province by stimulating small-scale activities in the form of local food chains, innovative projects and multifunctional land use. The strategy for implementing these projects emphasizes the careful consideration of tourism development, as values such as calmness, liveability, and biodiversity are important for residents as well as for the area's attractiveness to tourists. Based on research, the area mostly attracts visitors who seek calmness and closeness to nature (MarketRespons, 2024). Cooperation between municipalities, regional organisations and local communities is necessary for the development of sustainable tourism regarding the environment, the wellbeing of residents, and the quality of the landscape. The guiding principles in spatial planning in Limburg in the future are the character and history of the landscape, which is maintained by valuing, cherishing, and promoting the experience of Limburg's landscape to strengthen the story it tells. The landscape serves as a collective memory of the past, a collective experience in the present, and a collective promise for the future (Province Limburg, 2022).

According to LEADER Zuid-Limburg (2023), the potential of the region to develop its tourism sector as a driver of regional development lies in the distinctive elements that the landscape has to offer, the favourable location near the border of the Netherlands and its high levels of biodiversity. The landscape offers opportunities for projects that highlight these characteristics, and the cultural identity of the region in the form of tourism, the establishment of local supply chains, gastronomy, participatory farm visits and retreats. The organisation emphasizes that the focus lies not solely on financial gains, but also on the maintenance of the traditional characteristics of the landscape. The benefits for nature and residents should be prioritized, and therefore activities should be based on the qualities of the landscape rather than come at their expense. LEADER Zuid-Limburg noted that the development and transition of activities on the countryside towards a more recreational function can pose a threat to the current demographic and social cohesion. This stresses the importance of a critical examination of the impact of touristic developments in rural spaces. Rural Limburg represents a relevant case for this research, as it has previously been identified as a promising setting for the diversification of land use, particularly because emerging socio-ecological challenges and changing policies force farmers to shift away from their traditional agricultural activities. At the same time, the region is actively promoting tourism as part of the regional development strategy, which creates a useful context to examine how these developments impact the function of the space and the regional identity.

Mapping key actors in rural spaces in the province of Limburg.

Key actors were identified based on a literature review on tourism development theories, case studies and strategic roadmaps by municipalities and organisations.

Fadeeva et al. (2001) identified the different categories of actors in the sector of tourism with the purpose of understanding how a multiple actor network can contribute to sustainable development in the sector, to overcome the challenges posed by the large number of actors involved. Tourism is a very diverse industry that consists of parties that drive offer and demand, authorities and non-governmental organisations. Fragmented sectors often face challenges of reaching long term and collective sustainability goals, as actors tend to focus on individual problems and profits, losing sight of the broader context.

LEADER Weertland:

LEADER Weertland is a collaboration between the EU, 3 municipalities, and Province Limburg. LEADER is a EU-wide program that is part of the Common Agricultural Policy

and subsidizes bottom-up initiatives for the vitality of rural areas. Proposed initiatives that are eligible to receive subsidies must be valuable to the community, not to the initiator alone. Plans are documented in the local development strategy, which forms the guideline for the distribution of subsidies. A defining characteristic of this program is its participatory approach. The local community is actively involved in decision-making and project development, which allows for the implementation of projects that count on community support. Activities are managed by Local Action Groups, consisting of public, private and civil society partners. Throughout the year, the regional LEADER board organises meeting for residents, farmers and organisations, and sends out surveys to measure needs, ideas and complaints about the developments in the region (LEADER Weertland, 2023). LEADER Weertland was selected to represent residents of rural Limburg in this thesis, as this organisation has access to a large collection of data about residents' preferences.

Limburg Farmers' Union (LLTB):

LLTB is a mediator between farmers and politics, that has been active in the whole province of Limburg for 125 years. Their responsibility is to represent the needs of the agricultural sector in regional and national policy making, and to translate complex regulations and legislation into practical procedures to farmers. The LLTB also assists farmers in gaining access to subsidies and permits. Furthermore, they coordinate and implement projects related to agriculture on different themes such as education, climate, food production, rural land and entrepreneurship. Farmers can become a member of the union to connect and strengthen the relationships between farmers, citizens and the landscape. The landscape is an important theme, because of the growing demand for living, recreation and work in rural areas. LLTB develops regional strategies for the improvement of agriculture along the lines of increasingly stricter regulations, while incorporating the interests of farmers and maintaining the landscape. The aim is also to bridge the gap between society and agriculture, and to provide an example for a sustainable agricultural network in the rest of the Netherlands (Provincie Limburg, 2017).

LLTB was selected to represent the interest of farmers in Limburg, and to gain insights in the vision of rural development from an agricultural perspective.

Visit Zuid-Limburg:

Visit Zuid-Limburg is part of a national network that operates under the Tourism Board ‘VVV Nederland’. This association facilitates the promotion of tourism in regions across the Netherlands, by collaborating with recreation businesses and organisations. Entrepreneurs from the region can become a member in exchange for promotion on the platform of Visit Zuid-Limburg. The aim is to attract visitors to the region to support businesses and the local economy by developing tourism products that highlight the features of the area. Activities include organising events, creating promotion and building partnerships between public and private entities to strengthen the tourism sector in Zuid-Limburg. Besides these goals, the organisation is also involved in the decision-making of regional planning and regulations, by working closely with the Province of Limburg and cultural institutions and environmental organisations, while also allowing residents to give input for initiatives in their living environment. This way, the organisation can ensure the support for the development of tourism in a way that is respectful to the local community and nature (Visit Zuid-Limburg, 2025).

Visit Zuid-Limburg was selected to represent the interest of the tourism sector in Limburg, because of their strong network, and participatory approach.

Policy context

All three organisations hold strong ties with the Province of Limburg, who regulates the development of tourism in the region in the zoning plan. This is documented in the municipal spatial vision, which is established by involving residents from across the province and from different target groups through a participation process, both online and in physical meetings. Results showed that there are diverging visions, but liveability, nature, and a sense of community were commonly agreed to be important. The landscape is important for the people of Limburg, and they particularly cherish the green and agricultural features. These preferences are incorporated where possible. The spatial vision is evaluated by an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). The commission EIA is an independent advisory body that maps out risks and opportunities of the envisioned policies (Province Limburg, 2021). Applications for new projects can be assessed according to the criteria that have been established on every theme in the policy document (Province Limburg, 2025). Any changes that are wished to be made to the landscape are required to follow the zoning plan amendment procedure by the Council of State. This procedure allows anyone to leave comments, which is assessed by the municipality, which often adjusts plans by scaling them

down, or tries to minimize concerns as much as possible. Eventually, the municipality will grant a permit, and citizens are allowed to file an appeal. This illustrates how tourism development is regulated by a combination of institutional control and public participation.

Residents

Besides interviews with three regional organisations that represent the perspective of the local community, farmers and the tourism sector, two residents were interviewed for personal stories and additional depth and context in the understanding of changing living environments because of tourism development. Residents were selected based on where they live and the presence of tourism in the area. For this research, some degree of tourism had to be present in the area, to allow residents to share their insight relating to this subject. The first resident lives on the countryside in the North of Limburg near national park 'de Maasduinen'. This area is a popular tourist destination and accommodates many facilities for recreation and cultural enrichment. The second resident lives in the South of Limburg, in a village adjacent to Maastricht. As Maastricht attracts many tourists each year, the areas surrounding Maastricht are a popular base to escape the bustle of the city. This area is characterized by hills, vineyards, farmland and forests and is located on the Belgian border.

4. Results and Analysis

To answer the research question, this chapter reports the results and analysis of the data collection. Each subchapter is devoted to one of the sub-questions mentioned in the first chapter.

4.1 What practices introduced by rural tourism influence the way the rural space is used?

Limburg's rural areas have seen a shift over the decades towards more tourism-oriented practices, in addition to the traditional agricultural functions. This transformation was discussed in interviews with the LLTB, LEADER Weertland, Visit Zuid-Limburg and residents of rural Limburg. Actors were selected to ensure that farmers, policymakers, entrepreneurs and the local community were represented.

Regional organisations

In relation to rural tourism development, farmers make use of the space through agrotourism, a relatively accessible form of rural tourism, because agricultural businesses are allowed to expand their business with an additional activity. Other forms of tourism acquire permits that

have to be in line with the future vision of the landscape (LEADER, 2025). According to the LLTB (2025), dairy and crop farms are more likely to adopt tourism related activities in their business plan in the form of agrotourism. This is also more prevalent under organic and small-scale farms. These farms often include campsites, farm stays, educational activities and farm shops in their offer. This opens private and productive spaces up to visitors, shifting the functionality of the area away from its productive function. Agrotourism also comes in the form of care farms for elderly and children, which are facilities that contribute to the local community (LLTB, 2025). According to the LLTB, the continuation of successful agrotourism is dependent on the contribution that it makes to farmers, nature and the community.

Another motivation to integrate agrotourism in the business model is for the preservation of the landscape, as well-maintained nature is an important aspect for the area's attractiveness. Varied crops, fruit trees and cows help maintain the physical features of the cultural landscape and simultaneously contribute to biodiversity and the tourism-driven economy (LLTB, 2012). LLTB (2025) emphasizes the importance of the landscape of Limburg as selling points in tourism. The area profits from the uniqueness of the hills in the South and the nature reserves in the North. This attracts mostly people from cities that seek quietness, relaxation and natural surroundings.

However, the landscape can also form an obstacle for the development of tourism due to the regulations of the municipality. The municipality regulates its expansion through permits to protect the landscape, especially in South Limburg where the landscape holds the national status. This reveals a tension between two parties, as they have the mutual goal to ensure the maintenance of the landscape, but the municipality tries to limit the interference with nature while farmers strive to integrate nature into their business. LLTB mediates between farmers and municipalities to support them in the establishment of their business (LLTB, 2025). Like the LLTB, LEADER (2025) recognises the challenges that the landscape forms for the execution of daily agricultural tasks. This is mainly caused by the infrastructure, that consists of narrow, sunken roads which are not suitable for large agricultural vehicles. This is further complicated by the competing use of space; the same roads are popular among recreational users. Especially in the South of Limburg, conflicts between cyclists and farmers are leading to increasing tensions, portraying how the multifunctional use of space can create inconvenience for the local population.

LEADER Weertland (2025) argues that the development of recreation in rural areas is beneficial for both tourists and residents. Activities in rural areas in Limburg such as camp sites, holiday accommodations, recreation and educational farms mostly benefit non-residents. Farms shops are popular among both residents and non-residents, as both appreciate local produce.

Visit-Zuid Limburg (2025) strives to stimulate tourism in the region in a way that is sustainable for nature, residents and tourists. Overall, their mission is to develop tourism while maintaining liveability for residents, creating profit for entrepreneurs and ensuring that tourism benefits not only guests but also the community. Although their scope is much broader than tourism development in rural regions, their work influences the way rural spaces are planned and used, often by cooperating with the LLTB and nature conservation organisations. Current projects include the promotion of local products through storytelling and improving infrastructure and laying out routes for recreational use such as hiking, mountain biking and horseback riding which increases the public accessibility of rural areas and allows visitors to connect with rural nature and culture. This allows for an active experience of the landscape, giving it a function beyond agriculture. Like LLTB, Visit-Zuid Limburg also mentions the conflicting use of rural space because of tourism. Narrow roads are shared among cyclist, hikers, cars and farmers which can lead to tensions. The organisation tries to limit disturbance by restraining from the promotion of motorized vehicles, highlighting the regulations of the use of space.

Although the agricultural sector is declining, farmers still shows a strong presence on the countryside. Tourism still plays a small role in the area in comparison to traditional agricultural activities (LEADER, 2025).

The three parties each have their own visions of the use of rural space for rural development, connected to the mission of the organisations. There is a broad agreement that the landscape is an important asset for the development of the rural space, and that tourism can provide economic benefits for a range of actors. At the same time, there are emerging conflicts about the use of space. While farmers seek financial profit through the extensions of their activities, residents are hesitant to attract visitors in their living environment. All parties appoint clear

communication as the solution to create support from the local community, which creates a foundation for the further development of the tourism sector.

Locals

Interviews with multiple locals provided insights in the perception of residents on touristic developments in their living environment. Although LEADER Weertland represents the interest of residents to ensure the liveability of rural areas, the addition of in-person interviews with locals allowed for more depth by understanding everyday experiences, values and concerns.

Residents make use of the space through recreational activities such as walking and cycling, besides daily routines such as work and school. The open fields that are used for agriculture are also popular spaces among children to play outdoors, creating a strong connection to the environment at an early age. The space is also used to come together as a community, in which social life is organised through local committees and associations (Resident 2, 2026).

The development of tourism in rural areas allows residents to explore and enjoy their own environment more, as local governments actively support new initiatives. Rural spaces that were once spontaneously used by locals are now increasingly planned and structured through routes and tours. Residents mention that they benefit from these initiatives: while one resident said they enjoy the new cycling paths that were facilitated for recreational use (Resident 1, 2025), another resident said they now gets to experience the area in new ways, for example, through vineyard tours and wine tastings, which have gained popularity in her area, attracting both locals and visitors (Resident 2, 2026). This illustrates how agricultural land is increasingly used for recreational purposes. The recreational use of space that results from tourism development is well received by the local community, as long as it can coexist with local land use, rather than reshape rural areas for commercial purposes (Resident 2, 2026).

The impact of tourism is mostly visible in infrastructure, as it is shifting increasingly towards recreational purposes such as cycling and horseback riding. This is seen as a positive side effect of the development of tourism because it benefits locals and visitors. The first respondent, living in a village named Well, mentioned his concerns about the plans to build a solar park on agricultural land, which is not directly related to tourism, but does illustrate the shifting function of the land and the disruption of the landscape, which can be experienced as

unpleasant by locals (Resident 1, 2025).

Use of rural space	Tourist use	Resident use	Traditional use
Roads	Cycling, walking, horseback riding, traveling	Mobility and leisure	Mobility, infrastructure for agricultural vehicles,
Farms/Agricultural land	Agrotourism	Work, living environment	Agriculture
Landscape	Selling point, tourist attraction, enjoyment	Living environment, leisure,	Preservation, limitation to agriculture

Figure 4. Use of space

4.2 How is the countryside of Limburg represented and promoted through rural tourism?

The second part of the data collection fills in the representation of the rural space through tourism promotion. The data was retrieved from 22 websites that promote tourism either through a platform or through websites of specific farm stays, camping sites, farm shops or for activities in the area. These websites were analysed on the way they promote rural tourism in the region of Limburg. Special attention was given to language use in the description of the surroundings. Terms were categorized and counted based on keyword frequency to establish the main themes that tourist businesses use to promote rural tourism in Limburg.

Overall, the data shows that most businesses emphasize characteristics to promote the region by making use of figurative speech and evocative adjectives to paint an appealing and vivid image. Landscape, nature, tranquillity and leisure opportunities were the most mentioned elements of the area to attract tourists. A considerable number of websites mentioned local culture, the Burgundian lifestyle and gastronomy, which implies that socio-cultural elements are important for the experience of the area, besides the physical features of the landscape.

Landscape

The landscape is frequently characterized by its unique and distinctive qualities. Often mentioned was the foreign feel that the area has, which is presented as an ultimate escape, distinguishing the area from others.

“The ‘Tuscany of the Netherlands’ or ‘Down Under’, there are many ways to describe South Limburg. And it’s easy to see why, because the beauty of this region is hard to capture in words. It’s different from the rest of the Netherlands, but in a good way. Here, you really feel like you’re somewhere else for a while. The language, the people, the landscape, everything feels more relaxed and friendly in South Limburg. The climate is usually just a little nicer

than in the rest of the country, too. More sunny hours, which means, among other things, that good Limburg wine is produced here, life is spent a bit more outdoors, and there's a higher-than-average number of terraces to enjoy.” (Parkvakanties, z.d)

Personal connections

Other elements that were often mentioned were connectiveness, among guests but also with the farmer. The personal touch of a small-scale holiday accommodation appeared many times as well. This contributes to a feeling of relaxation.

“While the children go on adventure, parents can enjoy peace, space, and a relaxed atmosphere. A farm campsite is often much smaller than a regular campsite, which quickly creates a sense of connection with other guests. You get to know each other, share stories, and often have direct contact with the farmer themselves. This personal touch is what makes camping on a farm so unique for many people”. (Zoek de Boer, 2025)

Nature

Nature is described using words such as rolling hills, scenic views, lush green fields, golden leaves, meandering roads, enchanting forests and picturesque villages to create an imaginary environment and spark emotions of wonder and longing.

“Praised for its green rolling hills, expansive plateaus, traditional half-timbered farmhouses, blooming orchards, sunken lanes, and hollow roads. Desired for its culture-rich savoir vivre, traditions, and love for local delicacies. Come and experience it yourself, feel like you've stepped abroad! Where the hills rise along the Maas, church bells ring, the earth reveals its treasures, and the landscape can be both gentle and wild: that is South Limburg. Amidst this nature, we enjoy all the culture and history the region has to offer. In South Limburg, there is endless to see and do, whether you are a culture enthusiast, sports lover, or someone seeking peace and quiet. Who would have thought a piece of 'foreign' charm could be so close to home? Here, you move between rolling hills and deep river valleys. Our landscape makes South Limburg the most distinctive corner of the Netherlands. Nowhere else in the country can you find such a varied mosaic of hills and valleys.” (Visit Zuid-Limburg, z.d).

Animals

Also, animals are described in ways that sketch a friendly environment, using words such as *the adorable sheep* and *the grazing cows*. Activities that are offered include feeding animals, milking cows, and following a sheep herder. They are intertwined with the daily activities of

rural life and are therefore presented as interactive, educational, characteristic, and integral to the authentic rural lifestyle.

“For peace, a beautiful landscape, and adorable sheep, family-run Schaapskooi Mergelland is the perfect place. Join the shepherd and his living lawnmower, his flock of sheep—for an hour-long walk. Enjoy the hillside forests, colourful fields, and stunning vistas while listening to the shepherd’s stories.” (Schaapskooi Mergelland, z.d)

In this context, animals are assigned a role different from their purpose in agriculture. Similarly, a stay on the farm is described as relaxing, connective, and cozy, also assigning it a function beyond its traditional purpose. Farms are also repurposed, into farm stays, farm shops and camping sites, praised for their authentic style and informal atmosphere. Farmers are described as welcoming, hosts and storytellers. They are presented as places to experience rural life, comfort and authenticity. The way rurality is represented in promotional material shows a shift from the traditional function of agriculture and the countryside. From this perspective, farmers, farms and farm animals are assigned different roles that fit in the narrative of tourism consumption but are not necessarily related to agriculture. Tourists are invited to experience rural life, but reaching an authentic experience is difficult because of the performative character of tourism. Many of the descriptions imply a certain feel or raise an expectation, which invites to partake in an authentic experience.

	Tourism function	Traditional function
Farmers	Host, personal connections, storyteller, educator, connection between citizens and countryside	Food production, crop/animal care
Farms	Accommodation, stay, intimate sphere, authentic, tours, recreational space	Agricultural production, storage, livestock raising
Animals	Educational, interaction, aesthetic element	Production

4.3 How do these changing functions of the countryside create different narratives of Rural Limburg?

The rise of diverse functions of the countryside generates different ways to experience the countryside, which in turn can shape people’s understanding and perceptions of the spaces in which they take place. Personal connections, experiences and memories play a role in shaping the narratives that people construct. This subchapter focusses on the narratives told, and the perceptions held about the countryside among residents and tourists.

Residents

For the first resident, the countryside was primarily a working environment. Having spent over 50 years in agriculture, there is a strong connection to the agricultural sector. The countryside is perceived as a functional space, dedicated to economic activity.

Simultaneously, it is also appreciated for its beauty and greenness.

“I have become closely intertwined with the environment, through the course of years. I have lived in this area for 54 years, so I got to know the people, built contacts. But the nature is also beautiful and very diverse. I worked in the agrarian sector my whole life, so that interests me as well” (Resident 1, 2025).

In contrast, the second resident experienced the countryside primarily as a social and experiential space, having grown up in a rural environment that functioned as both a playground and a social setting. The landscape was highly valued for its aesthetic qualities, open fields, and diversity, which also allowed for discovering and recreation.

“Around the houses, we had these vineyards and football fields and very large open fields with all kinds of vegetables. It was very beautiful, very open, and fun to play in. So when we were kids, we would go on hikes because there were so many enjoyable possibilities”.
(Resident 2, 2026)

In childhood, but also later in life, the social cohesion of the countryside was mentioned as an important element of the rural narrative, often mentioned in comparison to the more individualistic and isolated culture of urban areas. Sharing the beauty of the landscape to people from outside evokes feelings of pride, especially when appreciated for its foreign feel, making it a distinctive place. What others perceive as a holiday destination, is home to residents, highlighting the landscape's beauty and the pleasant social atmosphere.

“Whenever people say something about this area, I enjoy them talking about it. (-) Is just a sense of pride to be from here, and other people think its beautiful and feel as if they are on vacation, but for me its home” (Resident 2, 2026)

Residents seem to show low levels of resentment against the changing functions. They seemed tolerant towards receiving tourists in their direct environment. Although residents emphasized that they appreciate the strong social connections, they are also open to people from outside. Residents of rural areas in Limburg generally agreed that tourism does not

interrupt their daily activities. They agreed that tourism has brought new light to their environment, which also sparked their own attention to explore the area.

Even though the rural land, farmers, animals and nature have gained multiple functions, residents do not seem to feel alienated or frustrated by their changing environment. The open and accepting attitude towards visitors might be an illustration of the acceptance of the countryside as a multifunctional space.

Tourists

For tourists the place is primarily presented as a place of relaxation, to learn about rural life, to connect with nature and to escape from urban life.

Visit Zuid-Limburg (2025) promotes the area through storytelling, which conveys a certain narrative of the countryside by highlighting elements that are unique for this area, such as the rich Roman history and the landscape. Limburg’s landscape is characterized by rivers and springs. The non-urban area in South-Limburg is known as the Hill Country, a hilly region that is popular for overnight stays and receives 6,8 million visitors each year, putting the region under pressure. Visit Zuid-Limburg attempts to spread tourism pressure over a larger area, by using storytelling to highlight other areas that visitors are less familiar with.

Marketing and promotion through social media are important channels to communicate stories to outsiders. Storytelling strengthens the regional identity, and gives background context to sights, which enhances the experience of the region. Stories are also told through local products, such as wine, beers and typical traditional pies.

In this way, the multifunctional use of the countryside directly shapes the narratives of rural Limburg. In turn, narratives are created and spread to influence the use of space in rural Limburg, strengthening its multifunctional use. This shows that functions of rural space and narratives are closely intertwined.

	Tourists	Residents
Narrative	The countryside.. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • as a holiday destination • as an escape from urban life • as a place for relaxation, leisure and enjoyment • is educational • as a place to connect with nature • attracts because of its unique landscape and cultural elements 	The countryside.. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • as a home • as a place to grow up and have childhood memories • a work place • fosters social connections • has a strong community • is a place to discover for locals as well • evokes a sense of pride • is beautiful because of the unique landscape

Figure 5. Narratives about the countryside as perceived by tourists and residents

4.4 How are different interests and power positions negotiated in rural tourism development in Limburg?

In the context of rural tourism, LEADER Weertland mentions that policy makers encourage its development, because it is a good way to promote the region and it generates a considerable income through tourist tax and tourist spending. Tourism is often seen as a ‘milk cow’, providing a steady and reliable source of revenue, as tourists are generally willing to pay for accommodation, activities and local services.

“I, myself served as a councillor in a municipality where a very large Centre Parcs resort was located. That was very difficult. Once a year, we would go there to discuss increasing the tourist tax yet again. They would complain, complain, complain, but in the end, they simply passed the costs on to their guests. And people would still come anyway” (LEADER Weertland, 2025).

While such policies may be profitable for municipalities, they do not align with the desired everyday experience of residents of the countryside, as increased tourism puts pressure on rural space and disrupts local life.

“I see how things play out in practice, including both the positive and the negative aspects. And especially – how does this resonate in the local area? Is everyone happy and saying, “Great, things are finally happening here in the countryside”? Well, usually not. Most of the time, people prefer it to be pleasantly quiet and want to keep it that way.” (LEADER Weertland, 2025).

Usually, small-scale initiatives such as mini campsites cause more concerns, as they are intertwined with the daily life of residents, while large projects such as vacation parks are separated from the community (LLTB, 2025). The perceptions of residents on tourism are more complex. Generally, they acknowledge the economic benefits that it can bring, but support often depends on whether tourism developments affect their living environment and daily routines (LEADER Weertland, 2025). Agrotourism is generally perceived more positively, because it plays an important role in the economic support of farmers that suffer the consequences of restricting policies, and can serve as an instrument to maintain a resilient countryside.

According to LEADER (2025), tourism receives community support more easily when initiatives are innovative and embedded within the local community. Based on their

experience, residents tend to be hesitant when new initiatives in their area are proposed. When they are not familiar with the project and its possible impact, this might lead to uncertainty and concerns about disturbance. The importance of communication with the community is supported by Visit Zuid-Limburg (2025). They explain that the engagement of residents helps identify dissatisfaction, which allows policymakers to respond adequately. Besides frequent data collection of concerns, the findings must be evaluated and, most importantly, translated into concrete actions which are communicated back to residents. Without this follow-up, participants might lose the sense that their input can make an impact, which decreases satisfaction.

Although exclusion of locals is often mentioned in the theory, governmental organisations appear to be conscious about the value of including the voice of the community. Locals also reported to feel involved in the policy making process. Community initiatives were mentioned as a good alternative way to stimulate growth, while protecting the use value of the countryside to the local community, creating community support and allowing locals to be included in decision-making (Resident 1, 2025; Resident 2, 2026). When residents are involved in shaping their environment, this can also foster a sense of pride. Tourism can strengthen this, because it can bring attention to the distinctive features of a specific area

Residents appear to show high interest in the history of their own environment and enjoy sharing this with people from outside. Particularly by giving extra attention to heritage. An example can be found in the village Stramproy, where the Local History Foundation took interest in an old brewery, and, together with a local pub owner, started renovating the building, acquired a brewing installation and even set up a small museum. This enabled them to host lectures, tours and tastings, which gained popularity among people from outside. Many locals were involved in the restoration of the brewery, illustrating how a piece of history can bring people together to form a bottom-up initiative, creating something for themselves, but also enabling them to broadcast it to the outside (LEADER Weertland, 2025). This allowed them to claim some stewardship over tourism development, which mitigates the negative effect on the use value of their environment.

Residents appeared to be comfortable with the current level of tourism development in their area. One resident expressed concerns that further growth in tourism might lead to a loss of authenticity, as she felt that spaces are adapting towards tourists' expectations, and therefore they might start to resemble a theme park rather than a natural environment (Resident 2,

2026). The local community appreciates the ability to be involved in plans to restructure their living environment. As mentioned by LEADER Weertland, bottom-up initiatives are powerful because they create community support (LEADER Weertland, 2025). Municipal projects are accepted if they align with community values. One resident mentioned to feel a sense of responsibility to take an active role in initiating projects for the development of the area and the community itself (Resident 2, 2026).

Visit Zuid-Limburg (2025) mentioned their awareness that increased tourism can put pressure on communities, especially in vulnerable areas like the countryside. Their approach is guided by the pressure-capacity analysis of the Council for Living Environment and Infrastructure (CLI). This analysis illustrates the impact of different degrees of tourism on the living environment and society. Structurally high pressure of tourism negatively impacts mobility, real estate offer, physical damage to public spaces and heritage, environmental degradation, alienation of locals and disturbance of peace and safety. Low degrees of tourism have limited negative impacts but can cause high maintenance costs of infrastructure and public spaces. In a balanced situation, the number of visitors generates sufficient revenue to carry part of the costs required to maintain heritage, nature and public spaces. Residents feel at home in their environment and can perform recreational activities. This balanced situation can show seasonal peaks, especially during the summer and holidays (RLI, 2019). Although this situation seems most adequate, there is an economic incentive for municipalities and tourism businesses to strive for larger tourism numbers.

“Everyone has a stake. If you ask a hospitality entrepreneur in South Limburg: ‘how do you evaluate tourism?’ they would say it’s fantastic. And the more tourists come, the better. If you ask municipalities, the policymakers, they also think it’s great. I was a councillor myself, and I would proudly say, ‘Well, we generate about a million euros every year from the tourist tax.’” (LEADER Weertland, 2025)

mediated through policy and local engagement, which results in outcomes that are desirably aligned with local values.

	LEADER	LLTB	Visit-Zuid Limburg	Residents
Interest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraging tourism development revenue • Tourist taks/tourist spending • Considering local use values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wellbeing of the agricultural sector • Tourism should align with farmers interest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tourism for economic profit • Promoting local businesses • Protecting landscape, community and infrastructure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintaining tranquility, space, quality of life, community • Increasing liveability
Attitude towards rural tourism development	Rural tourism drives vitality of the countryside, but should be based on bottom-up initiatives.	Rural tourism serves as an additional income stream for farmers.	Rural tourism generates economic revenue, but should be developed according to capacity.	Tourists can enjoy the countryside as long as it doesn't conflict with local values.
Input	Controlling funds for subsidies, facilitating bottom-up initiatives, connecting local actors	Informing, mediating and advocating agrarian interest	Advising policy-makers, mediating between local businesses, community and government	Bottom-up initiatives and citizen participation

Figure 7. Results actors' interest and attitudes in tourism development

5. Discussion and conclusion

5.1 Discussion

As suggested by Schmid (2022), the complexity of the Production of Space theory calls for a creative and experimental application to other cases for its development. This formed a starting point, and left room for an exploratory approach to conduct research on the functions and perceptions of rural spaces, which resulted in the combination of Lefebvre's theory with the Growth Machine theory, for an additional institutional perspective. Lefebvre assumes that spaces are formed through human interactions, and while he did incorporate the planned space in his spatial triad, it is treated as equally significant as the use and the experience of space. An important nuance to add is that these interactions take place in a sphere that is shaped by institutional decision-making. The use and experience of a space is influenced by the way the space is planned to be experienced. Storytelling illustrates how reality is presented in a certain way, forming a narrative that highlights what's important and excludes what's not. Of course, classifying what's important is not neutral, and is strongly connected to interests in any form. If we take Visit Zuid-Limburg as an example, tourism business pay contribution and in return, they will be included in the tourism promotion of the region, which will eventually influence the way people make use of and experience the space. The same applies to the organisation of LEADER Weertland, because their decision on the allocation of subsidies has a direct effect on the use and experience of rural space. This

illustrates how social interactions with a space are not random, but a result of institutional decisions.

The findings of this research suggest that the development of tourism in rural regions in the Province of Limburg has had a significant effect on the functionality of the countryside. Not only the activities, but also their users have diversified, as tourism has attracted many visitors to spaces that used to be private or limited in accessibility. The wider range of use of rural spaces has assigned different roles to characteristic elements of the countryside. When it comes to rural tourism, farms have turned into educational, residential, recreational sites, and tourism accommodations. Farmers are hosts, teachers, and caretakers, besides being responsible for the production of food, which simultaneously fulfils a role to bridge the gap between farmers and citizens. Animals that were previously valued for their productional purpose are now also valued because children can play with them, or for aesthetic elements of the landscape. Farm roads are shared by farmers and cyclists, while vineyards have opened as spaces for recreation. As these elements have all been integrated in rural tourism, it involves some degree of commodification, which may have implications for its authenticity.

The ability of the countryside to carry multiple functions illustrates a hybrid identity. Besides the changing functions, storytelling, narratives and language also suggest that the perception of rurality has shifted as a result of the development of rural tourism, although this appeared to apply more to outsiders than to the local community, as they felt that tourism does not interfere with their daily life. Regional identity is socially constructed and continuously shaped through discourse and lived experiences (Mettepeningen et al., 2011). New experiences create new narratives about what rurality represents, but the data suggested that different perceptions of rural life did not weaken the regional identity. The countryside of Limburg shows that different meanings of rurality can co-exist, as long as they are in line with local values.

From the perspective of the Growth Machine theory, the economic profitability of tourism is significant for municipalities and the hospitality sector. This can create tensions between different actors, as conflicting interests put pressure on the social and natural environment. Residents are generally against developments that might threaten elements such as tranquillity and quietness (Molotch, 1976).

Limburg's countryside seems to show resilience against external influences and develops as a place where space is shared among agriculture, everyday living and recreation. This might be

due to the encouragement of bottom-up initiatives in rural Limburg, which policymakers highly favour over top-down planning considering its high rates of community stewardship and responsibility. According to Timothy & Boyd (2003), it is crucial to involve the local community in the planning and development of heritage, as this should be perceived as a community resource, which aligns with the findings of this research. This approach prevents conflicts between economic interests and social or environmental values. Another reason for the conscious development of tourism in rural areas might be the type of tourists it attracts, as the countryside mostly attracts visitors with values that align closely with the local community, appreciating nature, calmness and rural life (Leco et al., 2013).

Tourism development allows residents to explore their own environment through new infrastructure, activities and well-maintained heritage. Showcasing this to outsiders evokes a sense of pride. Residents appreciate the social cohesion on the countryside, as there is a strong sense of community. Nonetheless they have an open attitude towards people from outside, both to visitors and people that move from the city to rural Limburg. While current levels of tourism are tolerated and even welcomed, there is the awareness that further growth potentially has negative consequences for the authenticity, tranquillity and culture of the countryside. This shows in the scepticism towards new projects in the direct living environment.

The results of the collected data were summarized in a table, illustrating how tourists and residents can have a different perception of the same space. Tourists primarily see the countryside as an idyllic, connecting and educational space for recreation, holidays and farm tours. This perception is reinforced by tourism promotion and storytelling. Residents interact with the space through their daily routines, feeling a strong connection with it through their memories and the strong social cohesion. This contrast highlights the diverging narrative that can emerge around a single space, ranging from a romanticised idyllic place to a functional space that facilitates daily routines and supports social relations.

	Spatial practice	Resrepresentation of space	Resrepresentational space
Points of reference:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is the space used in an everyday context? • What daily routines take place in the space? • How is the use of space divided? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the visions for the space? /How is the space planned? • How is the space planned for tourists? • How is it planned for residents? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What memories and experiences are attached to the space? • What are the cultural and social characteristics? • What emotions do people connect to the space?
Promotion through tourism (tourist websites and interviews regional organisations)	Relaxing, cycling, hiking, short-stay, comfort, space, exploring	Recreation, accommodations, farms tours	Idyllic, vivid, connecting, educational, escape
Residents (through interviews with locals and interviews regional organisations)	Work, living, daily routines, social connections leisure	Liveability, infrastructure, atmosphere, social cohesion, recreation	Childhood memories, social relations, quiet, calmness, practical
Results:	Diverging spatial claims can coexist	Enjoyment vs practical	Romanticised vs functional

Figure 5. Results the Spatial Triad

Practical implications

The rural development model used in the Province of Limburg could be valuable for other rural areas in the Netherlands and abroad, because it emphasizes the importance of giving attention and awareness to maintaining landscape characteristics, preserving cultural heritage and ensuring the liveability of residents. This is particularly relevant in the Mediterranean region, where rural initiatives are often driven by foreign investments, highlighting the importance of local community support for meaningful and sustainable rural development.

Limitations of the research

This research was partly dependent on the participation of regional organisations. A key stakeholder in rural development decision-making declined to participate, as tourism was not on their agenda during the study period, which limited access to certain perspectives. This gap was filled in by exploring the interaction of other organisations with this stakeholder. Regional organisations were chosen to represent the interests of the local community, tourist businesses and farmers because of their close ties, expertise and rich data collection on the

needs and wishes of the different actors. This was complemented by interviews with two residents of Limburg, to envision daily routines, memories and personal stories. The research could have been further strengthened if, instead of relying on representatives, a large-scale study among residents, tourists and farmers could have been conducted, which was not possible due to the limited timeframe of this study.

Additionally, integrating two theories in this thesis proved challenging, given that both theories could have formed the basis of an independent study. To manage this challenge, the Growth Machine theory was assigned a supporting role besides the Production of Space theory.

Future research

Future research could start at the limits of this research by examining perceptions of the countryside in a broader population of residents, tourists and farmers. This could provide for a deeper understanding of the production of the rural space.

5.2 Conclusion

This chapter starts by revisiting the main research question:

“To what extent does the development of rural tourism influence the functionality of rural spaces in Limburg and the way rurality is perceived?”

The findings suggest that the growth of rural tourism in Limburg has led to a significant change in the functionality of the countryside, also impacting the way people experience and speak about rural spaces. These changes have not had a strong influence on the identity of rural Limburg. This can be attributed to the active involvement of residents in regional developments, as bottom-up initiatives are given space in policy making, and the maintenance of landscape characteristics is highly valued. Community support is important for the development of valuable rural tourism. Rural tourism might, to some extent even lead to the further definition of regional identity, as it allows locals to express their culture strongly through initiatives in an increasingly accessible area. The interest that tourists show in the landscape, traditions, and local delicacies can evoke a sense of pride among residents. Additionally, the expansive countryside allows for multiple functions to coexist without creating a sense of displacement among the local community, in contrast to the effects often

associated urban touristification. The impact of rural tourism also differs from that of urban tourism, because it attracts a certain type of tourists, who seek the connection with nature, which aligns with local values. Small-scaled and local are values that are promoted strongly in rural tourism material, fostering a stronger connection between tourists and the local community. In urban areas, particularly in large cities, the interaction between visitors and locals is often more distant, making it difficult for tourists and locals to form meaningful connections.

Although rural tourism has contributed to the transformation of the countryside's functionality, agrotourism has been a particularly powerful driver of change. Agrotourism is a distinctive category within rural tourism, as it is small-scaled in nature and the emphasis lies on the connection with the farmer, giving it a personal character. The close relation between tourists and farmers directly redefines the role of farmers and the purpose of farms and animals. These characteristic elements of the countryside can strongly influence the understanding and meaning that visitors have about rurality.

The countryside has become increasingly accessible, not only through stronger infrastructural networks, but also through the emergence of a wider range of narratives that shape the perceptions of rurality. Rural areas are now portrayed as vivid and dynamic places, that foster a wide range of recreational, cultural and economic opportunities. These changing narratives of rural Limburg influence the way both residents and visitors understand, value and use the countryside. Simultaneously, narratives are being created for the promotion of different functions of the countryside. This highlights a process of reinforcement where changing functions shape narratives, and emerging narratives shape the functionality of rural Limburg.

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