



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

“I am East German”

How an East German identity is experienced and defined by
the generation born after reunification

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List of abbreviations

GDR – German Democratic Republic

FRG – Federal Republic of Germany

AfD – Alternative für Deutschland (*Alternative for Germany*)

PEGIDA - Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes (*Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the Occident*)

IMGAME – Imitation Games

Stasi – Staatssicherheit (directly translated to: *security of the state*; Stasi was the secret police of the GDR)

Abstract

The increased success of right-wing movements and populist parties in East Germany since 2015 led to a public debate about the East and the people who live there. An increased number of young East Germans are now participating in talks and debates about the East, addressing the regions' problems and challenges but also trying to counter argue its negative image (Engler and Hensel 2018a, 9). This study focuses on how an East German identity is experienced and defined by the generation that was born after the German reunification in 1990. Using identity and narrative identity theory as well as the concept of othering and the internal orientalism theory, this thesis shows that the generation born after 1990 actively experiences being East German and critically engages with it. Public perception and negative media narratives are said to be the factors contributing the most towards the formation of an East German identity; however, the feeling of belonging to the East because of family history that is passed on through intergenerational narratives and connection to place play an important role as well. An East German identity for the generation born after 1990 can also be characterised through an increased political and social engagement within the region.

Key words: identity, East Germany, intergenerational narratives, media narratives, Heimat, regional identities

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1. Introduction

The increased success of right-wing movements and populist parties in East Germany since 2015 led to a public debate about the East and the people who live there. A large amount of young East Germans are now participating in talks and debates about the East trying to counter argue its negative image but also trying to actively engage with the regions´ problems and challenges (Engler and Hensel 2018a, 9). This study focuses on how an East German identity is experienced and defined by the generation that was born after the German reunification in 1990. It pays special attention to how an East German identity can be experienced and constructed through intergenerational and media narratives as well as the connection to a place and the understanding of Heimat (home, the homeland).

This thesis starts by introducing the reader to its aim as well as the research questions, this study´s delimitations and the relevance to Global Studies. In order to familiarise the reader with the subject, I will then present a brief background on the history of East Germany since 1990 and explain how the years after reunification still have an impact on the region and its people today. The background is followed by the literature review, which is divided into five parts, providing an overview of already existing research concerning identity, identity and narratives, identity and place, East German identity, identity and media narratives as well as a closer look at the focus of this study. The thesis then includes a chapter concerning the theoretical framework relevant to this research, which focuses on identity theory, narrative identity theory as well as the concept of othering and the internal orientalism theory. The methodology section describes how the data collection process has been prepared and executed and how the data has later on been analysed. The analysis chapter is followed by a separate discussion part.

This thesis finds that the participants´ understanding of their East Germanness is closely connected to the way the media reports about the East. Negative media coverage and the public perception about East Germany are said to be the most important factors that influence and aid in the construction of an East German identity. By being negatively defined through the media, the participants of this research also referred to an increase in social and political engagement as a consequence, trying to change the public perception about the East. Intergenerational narratives enable the participants to be aware of both an East German past and present and to be apprehensive about the differences that still exist between East and West. Narratives that are shared in an intergenerational context are personal, often emotional and concern the speaker´s memories that then create family histories. By listening to the their parents´ and grandparents´ life stories, the research participants are able to decide which aspects of the narrative they consider valuable and important for themselves and their own understanding of an East German identity. Other than that, being East German/from Eastern Germany is also closely connected to the perception of Heimat (home, the homeland), which links the participants to a specific place. This study also found that identity and place are also closely linked to language, particularly to a region´s dialect.

1.1.Aim and research questions

This thesis focuses on people who were born in the eastern part of Germany after the country's reunification in 1990 and have therefore not personally experienced an East German state. The purpose of this research is to find out whether there is still such a thing as an East German identity and which aspects contribute and are part of it. The research will focus on the interplay of intergenerational and media narratives as well as the connection of identity and place and the understanding and importance of *Heimat* (home, the homeland) for the participants' identity construction. The main research question is thus:

How do people born after the German reunification experience and define an East German identity?

The main research question will be supported by the following sub-questions:

1. How are narratives within families and the media as well as the awareness of history perceived in connection to an East German identity?
2. How does the notion of *Heimat* (home, the homeland) and the sense of being from a certain place contribute to a person's identity?
3. How is being East German and being from Eastern Germany perceived?
4. How important is an individual's East German identity amongst other/the interplay of other identities?

1.2.Delimitations

The focus of this study lays solely on how media and intergenerational narratives as well as the perception of *Heimat* contribute to an East German identity. This thesis does not look into other factors that could aid in its formation and construction, as the aforementioned factors are perceived to be the most relevant ones based on the results of the literature review carried out for this thesis. When focusing on an East German identity, this research is aware that this particular identity only makes up one part of a person's understanding of him- or herself as there are multiple other identities a person can claim or be attributed. While some conclusions of this thesis might be applicable for other studies concerning regional identities and identity construction based on intergenerational narratives, media narratives and/or the connection of identity and place, it has to be kept in mind that the (East) German case is special because of its roots that lie within the German-German separation, the subsequent reunification and the processes and challenges that followed reunification.

1.3.Relevance to Global Studies

Already existing research points out that identities and how they are constructed have changed and adapted to a more global world (Taylor 2009, 2). Even though globalisation enables a more interconnected world, it has seemingly also strengthened and increased the importance of regional identities (Bailly 2017, 3-4). Previously carried out research however also discusses how identities can be attached to places, when in a globalised world through increased mobility, places can be changed fairly easily and quickly (Taylor 2009, 13). Studying an East German identity in particular and its connection to place as well as the German understanding of Heimat (home, the homeland) is relevant to the field of Global Studies because it actively engages with the topic of regional identities.

1.4.Background

In 1990, the GDR (German Democratic Republic) and FRG (Federal Republic of Germany) reunified, marking the end of a 41 years long separation. With it came severe political, economic and cultural change for East Germans. Reunification was experienced as an external process by many of them; as the former GDR joined the FRG, an already well-established country, and took over its rules and laws (Staab 1998, 33). Consequently, an unequal balance of power between East and West emerged and cultural differences between both areas became more apparent, shaped by the decades long separation and different political and economic systems (Godeanu-Kenworthy 2011, 164). The years after reunification in East Germany were above all marked by economic uncertainty, the loss of jobs and inter-German migration from East to West (Klingholz 2015, 18; Struck 2017, 2-4). A lot of East Germany's current social, structural and economic drawbacks and disadvantages are said to have their roots in the years that followed reunification (Nestler and Kubiak 2016b, 32; Engler and Hensel 2018a, 3-4; 8). The increased success of populist parties and right-wing movements especially in Saxony, one of the East German federal states, since 2015 (Engler and Hensel 2018a, 3) has led to an increased public debate about the East and the people who live there. It also resulted in an increasingly negative discourse and degradation of the East in general that reinforces the image of the Eastern part of Germany and its inhabitants as different from the rest of the country (Rippl et. al 2018, 2). An increased number of young East Germans that were born after the reunification are now participating in talks and debates about East Germany and its problems but also try to counter argue its negative image (Engler and Hensel 2018a, 9).

2. Literature review

Identity studies are often referred to as “essentially contested” (Pickl 1997 in Andrews 2003, 2) as well as multi-layered and complex (Elliot 2011, xiv). Identity can be defined in multiple ways - for the purpose of this thesis, the following explanations have been chosen because of their proximity to the research topic. Generally, identity can be defined as “a label attributed to the attempt to differentiate and integrate a sense of self along different social and personal dimensions” (Bamberg 2011, 6). Identities thus differentiate individuals based on certain criteria such as “gender, age, race, occupation, [...] socio-economic status, ethnicity, class, nation states or regional territory” (Bamberg 2011, 6). Identities can be attributed to or claimed by someone. Identity and its formation can also be referred to as a person’s identity project, which is “shaped by the knowledge, truths and values of the larger society” (Taylor 2009, 41). It is a continuous process that can be subjected to change and without a clear end (Taylor 2009, 41). Gallinat refers to identities as “situational and embedded in practice until drawn out by particular confrontations” (2008, 666), while their formation is “based in the mundane and quotidian forms of everyday life leading to senses of belonging that allow for a reflexive positioning of the self and the other” (Gallinat 2008, 666). Relevant for this research is also the differentiation between “*gelebte Identitäten*” (“*lived identities*”) and “*inszenierte Identitäten*” (“*staged identities*”; Woderich 1997, 87). The former refer to experiences of everyday life that shape a person’s identity and are connected to traditions as well as collective experiences and history. The latter are characterised through emphasising what sets someone or something apart from the rest through cultural differentiation. In the case of East Germany that could for instance be the holding on to GDR customs and the enthusiasm for linguistic particularities and dialects. Staged identities can however also be narratives told by the media. Both types of identity however cannot strictly be separated from the other (Woderich 1997, 87). Identity is also closely connected with personal memory and collective past in which the personal memory is embedded (Godeanu-Kenworthy 2011, 161), which is then referred to as “subjective remembering of the past” (Godeanu-Kenworthy 2011, 172).

2.1. Identity and narratives

In identity research, narratives play an important role and can refer to different approaches when analysing the construction and formation of identities. Narratives can be understood as storytelling (McAdams and McLean 2013, 233) and the way in which autobiographical memories and narratives are shared; permitting individuals to “structure their experiences in a format that facilitates subjective reflection, and thus, the process of making sense of life, which

is critical to identity development” (Kroger 1996; Kunnen and Bosma 2000 in Fivush et. al 2011, 322). Narrating stories of the past, often referred to as life stories, is more than just a remembrance of previously occurred events; those stories have “defining character” (Bamberg 2011, 13) and can thus impact both the speaker’s and the listener’s identity. They can however also be understood as language, talk and how stories are told; thus referring to how identities are constructed by speakers (Taylor 2009, 8; 18).

2.2.Identity and place

Previous research has also been focusing on the connection between identity and place; so-called place identities, referring to the “importance of people’s experiences of places for their identities” (Taylor 2009, 40). Taylor suggests that in a globalised, modern world, a person’s connection and ties to place might have become weaker, as individuals are increasingly mobile (Taylor 2009, 1-2). It is frequently discussed how identities can be attached to places when they can be changed so easily (Taylor 2009, 13). Despite this, place in general and particularly the place a person lives and/or calls home (as place of residence and a place that is home are not necessarily the same) still have a special connection to identity, which are then referred to as local identities (Taylor 2009, 2;4). An identity that is connected to a place can also be created not only through a person’s connection and sense of belonging to the place but also through media narratives that shape how a place is seen. How others view a place can therefore influence on how the place’s inhabitants feel about it (Taylor 2009, 11).

The “born and bred narrative” (Taylor 2009, 11) refers to people feeling connected to and identifying with a certain place because their ancestors have lived in the same place for multiple generations while passing on traditions and histories connected to the place (Taylor 2009, 11-13). Identities based on this narratives are what Said referred to as “easy identities” (1994) and “identities that prioritize one belonging to which all others are subordinated” (Mulinari and Rätzzel 2007, 110). The “born and bred narrative” as well as the concept of home are closely connected to notions of gender and traditional gender roles (Taylor 2009, 39). Within the narrative, family relations and connections are important and home is often seen as female, linked to women and perceived as a “feminine, nurturing space created by women themselves” (Mallett 2004 in Taylor 2009, 70). When women and their understanding of home however deviate from this norm, they might face difficulties in “constructing belonging through the narrative” (Taylor 2009, 70).

With increased mobility in the contemporary world however, identity connected to place cannot be seen as the most important and stable one any longer, but as only a part of a person’s identity

(Taylor 2009, 16). Germans often identify themselves through their local and/or regional background rather than the national one (Venske 2014, 51). Regional identification in Germany is historically rooted and can be explained in multiple ways. Firstly, up until 1871 the country was split into smaller (city) states, dukedoms as well as kingdoms; each with their own ways of governance, administration and history. Even after reuniting all the region into one nation state with one head of governance, the country's external borders kept changing due to territorial losses after the First and Second World War. Secondly, the separation into GDR and FRG after the Second World War prevented generations of people from identifying with an all-German state. Thirdly, after the Second World War and the consequential loss of power and reputation, Germans retreated into more local and regional forms of patriotism, identifying more with their home cities or regions rather than being German (Venske 2014, 51).

Regional identity studies and studies of place and identity also focus on which places create a sense of belonging and home. *Heimat* and the feeling of home is an important concept in the German understanding of place (Gallinat 2008, 677). *Heimat* translates into English as home or the homeland, but its meaning and understanding reaches deeper than that. It is the place a person feels like they belong to and does not necessarily have to be one's home country but is "more about the region, the landscape, its taste and smells and people it shapes, their culture, their dialect" (Venske 2014, 50). A place in that way cannot only be seen as a territorial space but also has social and cultural aspects that make it feel like home (Gallinat 2008, 675).

2.3. East German identity

The topic of an East German identity has received thorough scholarly attention in regards to the so called "*Zweite und Dritte Generation Ost*" ("*Second and Third Generation East*", see for instance Staab 1998; Andrews 2003; Gallinat 2008; Nestler and Kubiak 2016a), referring to people born between 1965 and 1985 who spent a part of their live (and thus their socialisation and formative years) in the former GDR and a part of it in a unified Germany. There are different approaches to defining an East German identity and explaining how it has developed. Gallinat defines it as a "phrase that encapsulates a long and complex moral narrative of the recent past and the united German present. It invokes the past totalitarian state, the fall of the Wall, unification by "accession" (Glaeser 2000), the devaluation of the East, the caricature of eastern Germans [...] by western Germans, and, consequently, an eastern German resistance to the unified Germany and its politics" (Gallinat 2008, 666). In her research, she aimed at finding out whether people living in the eastern German states would rather identify as East German or as "being at home in Eastern Germany" (Gallinat 2008, 665). The term being East German is

rejected by the majority of participants in Gallinat's research because of its (negative) connection to the past and the GDR as well as being too political or not beneficial to an all-German nationality (Gallinat 2008, 666; 673; 679). Other ways of explaining being East German are sought, such as being from the East/Eastern Germany or being from the new federal states (Gallinat 2008, 666). The research finds that an East German identity is rather based on the familiarity of the East in terms of traditions and social norms and interactions and the sense of belonging and being at home in the East (Gallinat 2008, 673-74; 676-77). Gallinat however mentions that an East German identity was also partially forged by the "cultural and personal devaluation" (Gallinat 2008, 681) that many East Germans experienced from their Western counterparts.

Diverging from Gallinat's findings, others such as Matthäus and Kubiak (2013, 137) but especially Engler and Hensel argue that the label of being East German is not necessarily rejected amongst East Germans. According to their research, people growing up and living in GDR did refer to themselves as citizen of the East German state, but did mostly not refer to themselves as East German, because the West was seen as the ideal. It was only in the years following reunification that the collective identity of being East German emerged based on shared experiences in times of transformational processes as well as political, economic and social change and challenges (Engler and Hensel 2018a, 8). Engler and Hensel's approach is supported by Heft, who is arguing that as a result to the othering processes that former GDR citizen were subjected to after reunification, an East German identity emerged. Othering processes in this context refer to the representation of East Germans as different and as deviant from what is considered a (West) German normal as well as the on-going discursive differentiation between East and West (Heft 2016). The following extract from a German newspaper emphasises this point by stating that "[e]very Saxon, who is older than 25 and younger than 66, is an immigrant to this country and will be an immigrant until the end of his life. Just like every native from [the other eastern federal states]. Just like everyone, who was born in GDR." (Welt Online, July 2015 in Heft 2016). As a result of the initial othering processes from shortly after reunification and its continuation in present times, many East Germans rather "identify with Eastern Otherness" (Heft 2016) and create East German identities for themselves.

The understanding of themselves and how they experienced the political, social and cultural shift from being a GDR citizen to one in a united Germany as well as being referred to as

“minorities in their own country” and “symbolic foreigners” (Kubiak 2017, 28) has significant impact on the generation that was born after 1990 (Kubiak 2017, 27).

Within the research carried out about East Germany and East German identity, the generation that has been born after the reunification of the country in 1990 has received little attention. One of the leading scholars on the topic is Daniel Kubiak who in recent years started researching the identity of individuals from the Eastern German states born after 1990 related to various other topics such as migration and integration as well as how young East and West Germans experience their identities differently. He found that in this age group theoretically differentiating between East and West should not be relevant any longer as the country has been reunited for almost three decades. However, in what he calls “*Einheitsfiktion*” (“*fictional unity*”, Kubiak 2017, 27) political unity of a country does not always entail cultural and social unity. The research found that among young people from the West German states there is no connection and relation to a specific West German identity, as participants did not allude to the existence of that kind of identity. When asked to identify themselves they would rather refer to a local or regional identity such as the city or region they come from (Kubiak 2017, 36) as well as through differentiating themselves from East Germans and referring to them as the others. Being from West Germany is seen as normal in the way that it does not need to be questioned (Kubiak 2017, 25; 37). Research carried out by Roth and Quent underlines the participant’s answers by showing that the West is seen as the norm or as the German normal; the East is often constructed as different and divergent (Roth 2008, 69 and Quent 2015, 101).

Participants from the East did identify themselves with the East; however, without specifying exactly what it means to be East German and/or from Eastern Germany. They alluded more to the feeling of having a connection to the East that participants from the other part of Germany could not reciprocate for the West (Kubiak 2017, 36). Kubiak’s research also found that identity construction in East Germany in the generation born after 1990 is above all a reaction to experiencing negative and degrading discourse towards the East within the media but also through interpersonal contact (Kubiak 2017, 25). Through Imitation Games (IMGAME), Kubiak aimed at finding out how much East Germans know about West Germans and vice versa by seeing how well one group knows itself and how successfully it can imitate the other. The assumption prior to starting IMGAME, that was later proven correct, was that the minority group, in this case the East Germans, will be more successful in imitating the other group and knowing more about them as West Germans are the majority and in that way the norm. It can

be assumed that the dominant discourse in Germany is West German centric (Kubiak 2017, 31-32; 34).

Kubiak's main findings can be summarised as follows. Firstly, being East German/ being from East Germany is often negatively represented in the media ranging from jokes made about reunification being a mistake as well as portraying all of East Germany as an area full of problems and racists. Secondly, there is also ignorance, non-interest and neglect of GDR history and people's experiences. Thirdly, economic disadvantages that persist in the East are a direct result of economic policies and deindustrialisation after reunification (Kubiak 2017, 35). Subjectively experiencing negativity and degradation enables a stronger connection to being East German and enables certain feeling of protectiveness over the region (Kubiak 2017, 35). This can also be linked to what Branscombe et. al refer to as an identity threat; the risk to being ascribed a certain identity against one's will (Branscombe et. al 1999 in Lui and Hilton 2005, 546). Kubiak calls this "*Fremdidentifikation*" and "*Selbstidentifikation*" ("*external identification*" and "*self-identification*"; Kubiak 2017, 36) – by being defined (negatively) through someone else, a self-identification process starts and a stronger sense of belonging to a particular group can emerge, an observation that can be found in postcolonial theories as well (Kubiak 2017, 36). Kubiak concludes that East Germans, even when born after 1990, are subjected to othering processes, referring to West Germans as the norm and East Germans as a divergent group in a type of us versus them mentality (Kubiak 2017, 30), that have a significant impact on their identity construction. For the participants of Kubiak's research the most significant factors influencing an East/West identity formation are narratives within their families and circle of socialisation, education and media (Kubiak 2017, 37).

2.4. Identity and media narratives

Concerning negative representation in the media, Rippl. et al (2018) carried out interviews focusing on the influence of media coverage on an East German identity and how it often contrasts with the individuals' own perception of the region they come from. Differentiating between East and West is a theme that often occurs within media narratives, used as a symbol to highlight the still persistent differences between them. All major mass media are owned by West Germans and have their headquarters in West Germany; Krüger refers to this as a "cultural hegemony of West Germans" (Rippl et. al 2018, 2). "Discursive degradation" (Rippl et. al 2018, 2) is what Kubiak calls the continued focus on negative attributes of the East such as its (compared to the West) less prosperous economy and an alleged underdeveloped democratic understanding of its people. Positive attributes towards the East and its achievements such as

the peaceful revolution that led to the fall of the Berlin wall, economic and democratic achievements during the time after reunification and the advanced emancipation of East German women are often not talked about. The media having referred to East Germans as *“Bürger zweiter Klasse”* (*“second class citizen”*, Rippl et. al 2018, 2) especially in the time after reunification still impacts on how people from East and West see each other today. *“Dunkeldeutschland”* (*“dark Germany”*, Rippl et. al 2018, 3) is another negative term used to describe East Germany and its perceived failures and problems. Media coverage in that way influences and compares, keeping the categories East and West alive. However, it needs to be mentioned that self-categorisation as victims amongst East Germans also exists (Rippl et. al 2018, 2).

The respondents in Rippl et. al’s study were not only part of the generation born after 1990; however, in terms of media coverage their answers did not diverge much from the opinions of participants that actually experienced the GDR – feelings of discursive degradations seem to be inter-generational. Collective identities such as being or feeling East German are only relevant for personal identities when an individual can identify with the narrative connected to that identity. In the case of East Germany that refers to how much negative media narratives are able to influence the identity construction of being East German. Rippl. et al refer to an East German identity as only one part of multiple social identities that a person can have – the more an individual identifies with the collective identity of being East German the more important it will become for a personal identity as well (Rippl et. al 2018, 3). The study however also found that for many the term East German and a respective East German identity was too broad for many participants to connect to and difficult to define (Rippl et. al 2018, 5-6).

2.5. Focus of this research

This thesis takes Rippl et. al and Kubiak’s research as a starting point and focuses more strongly on the interplay of intergenerational narratives and media narratives and the understanding and importance of Heimat. Both previously carried out researches chose relatively broad groups of individuals from all five Eastern German states (including Berlin). Rippl et. al interviewed people of all ages and with mostly the same academic, social and professional background, whereas the backgrounds and places of residence of Kubiak’s research participants were not specified. This thesis’ target group shares a similar background and all participants live in the federal state of Saxony. By choosing a narrower regional focus, and thus keeping the region constant, and interviewing a homogenous group of people, it will be possible to see which other factors can contribute to a person’s identity.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theories used in this thesis, in combination with the results of the literature review, will be used as a starting point to understand what identity is, what contributes to it, how it is constructed and how individuals have more than just one identity. The analysis of the data will show, whether this research can merely proof the existing theories or can contribute to them through its findings.

3.1. Identity theory

Identity theory suggests that each person has a “socially constructed self between individual behavior and social structure” (Hoog, Terry and White 1995, 255), thus referring to the relation and influence between an individual and society at large. A person’s self is a “multifaceted and organized construct” (Hoog, Terry and White 1995, 256); its various parts are then called identities. Role identities make up an important part of identity theory, referring to the supposition that individuals’ identities largely depend on their roles in society. In that way, each person has an identity for every position they hold within a society. Role identities are applied by individuals to themselves and are based on the way they define themselves and their positions in a social setting. They are arranged in a hierarchy based on the probability that they might be invoked in any given situation (Hoog, Terry and White 1995, 256-57; 259). Two components of this theory are particularly interesting for this research. Identity salience discusses how some identities might be more relevant for an individual’s understanding of him- or herself than others. The higher an identity ranks on a person’s scale, the more likely it is that this particular identity prevails in a particular situation; identities ranking lower are less likely to be invoked and thus less self-defining. Identity salience also has an impact on how individuals form relationship with others, especially concerning how others are understood and evaluated; others are seen more positively when their salient identities are the same. Salience is also closely connected to role identities – a particular identity will become more important when a lot of social relationships are connected to it. Thus, once a person is strongly committed to a certain identity, the higher its level of salience will be. Contrarily, the role-person merger rather refers to how important an individual feels a certain identity is in comparison to another (Hoog, Terry and White 1995, 257-59).

3.2. Narrative identity theory

Since this thesis is interested in learning more about how narratives influence identity, the narrative identity theory provides a good starting point. Narratives can be seen as tools for

identity construction; through them people “convey to themselves and to others who they are now, how they came to be, and where they think their lives may be going in the future” (McAdams and McLean 2013, 233). Narrative identity theory sees people as storytellers that are able to construct their own identities through telling stories about their lives. In that way they are able to answer questions that evolve around the topic of identity, such as “Who am I?” and “How did I come to be?” (McAdams and McLean 2013, 235). Within narrative identity theory, McLean, Pasupathi and Pals have developed the so-called sociocultural model (2007, in McAdams and McLean 2013, 235), which proposes that it takes time to construct a narrative identity. It is based on the sharing of stories between different people, thus “selves create stories, which in turn create selves” (McAdams and McLean 2013, 235).

When continuously repeating and re-telling stories, that are not only shaped by the narrator but also through various social influences, the individual telling the story slowly shapes a narrative identity. When others approve of a certain story, the storyteller is more likely to hold on to that story and let it shape his/her identity (McAdams and McLean 2013, 233; 235-36). Autobiographical narratives play an important role within this theory as well and are critical for identity formation, as they shape a person’s understanding of him-/herself based on the remembrance and reconstruction of past experiences, with a focus on thoughts and emotions (Fivush et. al 2011, 322-24).

Most interesting for this thesis is the aspect of intergenerational narratives, as “personal narratives are also informed by the stories we know about others” (Fivush et. al 2011, 337). These kind of narratives refer to the experiences, feelings and thoughts that are shared through stories from different family members. It allows the older generation to pass on their understanding of the past, while the younger generation is able to compare those experiences with their own thoughts. Intergenerational narratives can help in constructing and passing on a family identity and establish a feeling of being connected to the past for the younger generation. In that way, identities are developed through family history and by comparing one’s personal identity with the identity of parents and grandparents (Fivush et. al 2011, 337-38).

For the purpose of this thesis, the narrative identity theory can also be used when talking about media narratives. Being exposed to narratives created by the media, similarly to intergenerational narratives, allows the listener to pay attention to the stories that are deemed relevant and compare them to their own experiences (Breen et. al 2017, 243). Media stories that

are considered important, and thus highly salient for a person, can be recalled easily and multiple times and in that way, just like non-media narratives, contribute to a person's identity. Media narratives are thus "highly relevant and consciously accessible" (Breen et. al 2017, 256) and can also contribute to the formation of collective identities (Breen et. al 2017, 243). Sarbin (1997 and 1998 in Breen et. al 2017, 244) called media stories the "raw material for the development of the self". The development of a theoretical framework on how media narratives influence identity as well as how they interact with intergenerational narratives is still on-going, as scholars call for further research on the topic (Breen et. al 2017, 256).

3.3. Othering and Internal Orientalism theory

The concept of othering usually belongs to post-colonial theory and Said's Orientalism (Said 1978), but can to some extent also be applied when aiming to learn more about an East German identity. Othering in Said's terms refers to the difference between Europe/the West and the Orient that were constructed by Europeans with the help of Orientalism; Europe being the norm, modern and what was considered normal, whereas the Orient was presented as different and underdeveloped. Othering thus focuses on the establishment of differences between the two areas in order for the Europeans to differentiate and define themselves (Johnson and Coleman 2012, 867).

Othering in an East German context however cannot directly be compared with post-colonial others, as East Germans were always acknowledged as German on a racial and ethnic level. Thus, the racist dimension in that case cannot be applied (Heft 2016). Focusing on an East German perspective, the way the colonising countries perceived colonised areas could be compared to a certain extent to the way the West regards the East. In both cases the seemingly more developed country/region is the norm and compares itself to the other; perceived differences are then considered as a deviation of those norms. Othering processes can both be directed towards people and regions. The latter can be explained through the Internal Orientalism theory, when othering is established through discourse "that operates within the boundaries of a state, a discourse that involves the othering of a (relatively) weak region by a more powerful region" (Johnson and Coleman 2012, 867). The discourse is shaped by negative and inferior references towards the perceived weaker region (Johnson and Coleman 2012, 867). Othering processes concerning people are structured similarly, referring to one group as the norm and the other as deviant and different, establishing an "us" and "them". Identities can then be constructed by identifying with either of those groups and acknowledging the differences of

the other (Kubiak 2017, 30). In the case of East Germany, an East German identity can then for instance be established by identifying with “Eastern Otherness” (Heft 2015).

4. Methodology

4.1. Methodology, qualitative interviews and interviewees

The methodology chosen for this research is of qualitative nature. Qualitative research methods enable a researcher to better understand attitudes and causalities towards a certain topic. While it is in general never a simple task to determine these, qualitative methods offer a more in-depth perspective than quantitative ones (Creswell 2009, 4). For this thesis, semi-structured interviews have been carried out in order to collect data, providing the advantage of using a script that can be altered during the interview if necessary. This allows for follow-up questions when appropriate and in that way additional, detailed information emphasising the interviewees own perspective can be compiled (Bryman 2012, 470-472). Semi-structured interviews provide the opportunity for a deeper insight into the participant’s thoughts – identity is very personal as well as multi-layered topic, and therefore interviews can gather in-depth information and data. The use of interviews for research purposes has been criticised, referring to the artificiality of the conversation and how participants can be led on to talk about subjects that they usually would not talk about. It is also often remarked that the interviewer can potentially influence the interviewees with his/her own opinions (Taylor 2009, 5-6). However, the use of interviews can also be justified and the criticism addressed. The literature review has shown that an East German identity is a topic of interest for the target group of this research that is openly talked about and therefore already present within the participants’ minds. Taylor furthermore argues that interviews do not necessarily have to be distinct from “naturally occurring talk” (Taylor 2009, 6) depending on how well they are carried out. Additionally, even the interviewers own opinions and thoughts, just like the participants’ ones, are informed by what has been said on the topic before and are thus never completely original and unbiased (Taylor 2009, 6).

In order to find suitable participants for this research, I made use of personal contacts and relied on the referrals of those contacts to other individuals who were then interviewed. Finding research participants in that manner is what Bryman refers to as “snowball sampling” (2012, 202). A total of 10 individuals were interviewed. They were chosen based on how well they suited the aim of this research and had to match the following criteria: currently residing in the federal state of Saxony, having parents/grandparents who grew up in GDR, being in the final stages of their studies or having recently started working in their respective fields and being

born between 1990 and 1994. The research participants were selected based on those four categories for multiple reasons and in accordance with the aim of this research. Firstly, choosing a rather narrow, regional focus by only interviewing individuals who live in Saxony enables a closer look at how a specific and limited territorial space influences identity and also sets this research apart from what has been done before. Secondly, it is necessary for interviewees to have parents/grandparents who grew up in GDR since this thesis looks at the importance of intergenerational narratives and how family, parent's and grandparent's stories can shape one's own understanding and perception of the past and identity. Thirdly, the participants are all either close to finishing their studies or have just started their professional careers, meaning that all of them find themselves in a similar life situation, starting to transition or having just transitioned from a student to a working life. Lastly, all participants were born between 1990 and 1994, the main years where transitional change occurred in East Germany while shifting from GDR to FRG structures and governance and respectively the main years that were responsible for the formation of an East German identity for the participants' parents and grandparents. It is therefore interesting to use this time frame and research how family members that lived through these periods of change experienced them and how they passed on their personal understanding of that time. Additionally, all of the participants strongly oppose right-wing ideology, right-wing movements and populist parties.

Before conducting the interviews, I prepared an interview guide (see appendix 1) to outline the interview's basic structure, based on the literature review and the main themes for this research, as Bryman and Creswell point towards the necessity of having a good understanding of what has been written before (Bryman 2012, 98; Creswell 2009, 25-28). The interview guide has been divided into three larger and two smaller sections. The first smaller, introductory section aimed at finding out more detailed information about the participant's and their family's backgrounds and also served as a possibility for the interviewees to get used to and comfortable being in an interview setting. The larger interview sections concerned family stories and intergenerational narratives, media narratives and their impact on identity as well as identity and place. The final section consisted of a few concluding questions. These categories are overlapping and cannot strictly be separated from each other. While the interviews did not strictly follow the structure of the interview guide and mostly developed more towards actual conversations, it proved useful to have different sections, as it provided both myself and the research participants with a certain kind of structure and focus, also in case the conversation would stray too far from the actual topic. All questions aimed at hearing participants' personal

stories, thoughts and opinions. Next to focusing on the spoken words, I also paid attention to the participants' body language and whether there were any strong physical reactions or facial expressions to certain topics and/or questions. The guide developed prior to conducting the interviews is therefore as the name says merely to be seen as a guide in a supporting function, while the majority of attention should be paid to how the research participants understand the research subject (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, 31).

For this research, five women and five men have been interviewed, in order to see if the topic of an East German identity also has a gender dimension. While such a small amount of participants is not statistically relevant, it still provides a first indication whether there are differences between the genders on how an East German identity is experienced and defined. All interviews were carried out in German, the native language of both the participants and myself, which significantly decreased the risk of misunderstandings and misinterpretations. The interviews were conducted within a three week time span; 9 interviews were carried out face to face in Germany, either in the participants' homes or in cafés, the remaining one was done via a video call on Skype. Conducting the interviews in person and while being in the same location proved to be more comfortable for the participants, especially the ones that did not know me prior to this research. Meeting in person seemed to give me a lot more credibility as a researcher and a quicker establishment of trust. The most important aspect throughout the interviews was to get to know more about the research participants' experiences and understanding of the topic. My main focus was on learning more about their personal stories and being open to different understandings of the subject. I tried to keep the interactions between the interviewees and myself as natural as possible within an interview setting; I did not regard them merely as a source of information but was genuinely curious about their stories and views.

4.2. Process of analysis

The data collected through the semi-structured interviews has been analysed by firstly transcribing and then analysing them with the help of the thematic approach, finding similar and/or repeating topics, references, phrases or expressions for all interviewees and organising them accordingly (Bailey 2008, 127). While transcribing the Skype video call, I had the advantage of not only listening to the interviewees answers again but was also able to see the person again as the recording included the video conversation and could also observe the body language. All in-person interviews were recorded with my phone; all participants knew they were being recorded and approved of it prior to starting the interview. Transcribing what has

been said during the conversations bears various difficulties and risks – errors can occur when translating the spoken word and its surrounding sounds into a written text (Bryman 2012, 486). In that way, transcription are an important part of the research process and cannot only be seen as a means to transform speech into texts, but as a part of the actual analysis and interpretation (Bailey 2008, 129-30). Transcribing the interviews was done with that in mind; it was also carried out as close to the interview date as possible, enabling me to still remember the interviewees and include notes on their expressions, emotions and body language that I found important. The transcription process was done by writing down what has been said by the interviewees with a focus on the meaning rather than linguistic expressions, but including these nonetheless when deemed relevant (Bailey 2008, 129-30). As this thesis is interested in how the research participants understand the subject of an East German identity, this seemed to be the most useful way of transcribing.

The transcription process offered a lot of data, which needed to be sorted through, divided and ranked according to its relevance towards the aim of this thesis. After having sorted through the data, I divided the findings into different themes with the help of coding. Coding was done by both looking for themes that I already knew about due to the literature review and the theory relevant to the subject but also by finding new codes that have not been mentioned before but were frequent throughout the transcripts (Creswell 2009, 184-190). This process followed Creswell's explanations, by firstly reading through the material multiple times and noting down observations, thoughts, questions, interpretations and frequent occurrences of similar answers. These observations served as the foundation for the coding process. Secondly, a narrower focus was applied to sort through the data and highlight those parts that occurred frequently. The materials were read through multiple times to ensure that all important information was caught. Lastly, the codes were organised according to the different themes they alluded to. The different themes serve as the foundation for the result chapter of this thesis (Creswell 2009, 184-190).

The results of the semi-structured interviews are presented and analysed in four different sections that correspond with the four sub-questions of this study. A separate discussion chapter will sum up the results and answer the main research question. I have chosen to present the data that way to facilitate a more structured approach.

4.3. Role of the researcher and ethical considerations

The CODEX rules and guidelines for research emphasise that when doing research involving people, human dignity, welfare and rights have to be upheld at all times (CODEX 2018). The topics discussed in this research are personal and intimate, as they deal with family stories, family histories as well as the participants' own feelings and thoughts about their identity and their homes. Given the nature of the topic, this research has been approached with clear ethical considerations and boundaries in mind. As a researcher I am interested in the topic of an East German identity on an academic level; however, being from East Germany myself and mostly fitting into the target group of this research as well, it was important to me from the beginning to be aware of the fact that I have a certain subjectiveness and bias towards the research topic that has to be taken into consideration (Pillow 2003, 176). To counter that, I tried to be open towards the interviewees' stories, experiences and opinions and see them from their perspective. I do not think that it is necessarily negative to be closely connected to the research topic, as it was easier for me to understand a lot of the participants' points of view; I am also very familiar with the background they come from. Apart from my role as a researcher, there are other ethical aspects to consider. Kvale refers to the power relations between the researcher and the interviewee. When establishing a relationship with the research participants, especially the ones that I have known prior to this research, it can happen that the interviewee is revealing more than originally intended or planned. Contrarily, it is also possible that the participant does not feel comfortable enough sharing too many personal information due to us knowing each other outside of the research setting (Kvale 2006, 482). Power relations also refer to the fact that throughout the interview, the researcher still controls the conversation and how it is transcribed and interpreted afterwards (Kvale 2006, 484-85). Completely forgoing this is not possible; however, it is important to recognize the existence of power relations and reflect critically upon their significance (Kvale 2006, 485-86). Additionally, the participants' anonymity, privacy and consent need to be valued at all times.

5. Results and Analysis

The following section presents the findings of the semi-structured interviews and analyses them with the help of the theoretical framework and the knowledge gained throughout the literature review. I will present and analyse the findings in four separate sections that correspond with the themes addressed by the sub-questions of this research.

5.1. Identity and (intergenerational) narratives

Within this thesis, I wanted to find out how much and in what way parents and grandparents talk about their experiences of growing up and living in GDR and how that impacts the younger generation. The results in that section will therefore be viewed through the lens of the narrative identity theory with a special focus on intergenerational narratives. Generally, the participants' answers are in line with what the theory suggests. All of the respondents said that talks about their family's East German past are done openly and honestly; however, not that frequent, dependant on the occasion or when they would be asked about it. What became apparent in all of the interviews is that the respondents' parents and grandparents do not talk about their East German past in a depreciative way. They rather refer to it as a part of their lives that has been lived under different circumstances than those in present-day Germany but they do not classify their past as unhappy. They talk about being glad that the GDR does not exist any longer and list the perceived failures of that state such as the lack of freedom of speech or movement, but they do not evaluate their lives as negative. Sometimes the conversations are about the political or economic situation in GDR, but mostly the narratives concern personal memories and stories that quickly turn emotional. This is what Godeanu-Kenworthy refers to as "subjective remembering of the past" (2011, 161), as the following excerpts from the interviews show.

Respondent 4 says:

"My dad used to be a truck driver when the GDR still existed and to go home he always had to leave the highway on the last exit of GDR before the West. He tells this story a lot about how he always wondered what it would be like to just drive further into the West and be free. It wasn't an option then but it still makes him emotional to talk about it. He also talks about how liberating and also scary it was to finally cross the border after it was opened. Both my parents usually tear up a bit when they recall those memories. Even today when we drive through Germany and get close to what used to be the border they talk about how we're crossing the border now."

Respondent 8 says:

"The place that my parents and I live in is about 10km from Bavaria [Bavaria used to be part of FRG], so in GDR times that was really close to the West. My parents always say how that had such a big impact on them, to be so close to the West but never getting there. I think that made them feel the restrictions of GDR even more."

The interviews also showed that it is common for parents and grandparents to compare the lives they lead in GDR with the ones they have today. They especially compare the lack of opportunities that GDR offered them in terms of freedom of speech and movement, having no variety of choice in products they could buy, having to queue in shops whenever goods from

outside of GDR were delivered or how certain options like going to university were dependent on whether they were supporters of the regime and the leading party or not. The respondents also referred to how their older family members would always encourage them to make the most out of every opportunity, as they are lucky enough to grow up in present-day Germany that does not impose restrictions on its citizen the way the GDR government did. All of the respondents said that this makes them very aware and appreciative of their advantages compared to their parents. It also makes them more reflective of the past that sometimes seems difficult to fully understand as their parents and grandparents' way of growing up was quite different. Intergenerational conversations are however not only about the differences between GDR times and present-day Germany but also about the differences that still persist between East and West. While the respondents' parents and grandparents talk positively about the freedoms gained since reunification, they are also critical about for instance the increase of poverty in the East or the feeling that society is not as tightly connected anymore and a more individual mind-set persists.

Retelling stories of the past enables the older generation to structure their memories and pass on what they consider important and valuable; in that way it allows them to make sense of their experiences, which is critical for identity development (Kroger 1996; Kunnen and Bosma 2000 in Fivush et. al 2011, 322). The narrated stories however do not only contribute to the speaker's identity but also to the listener's; in that way the generation born after 1990 receives a first-hand account of their parents and grandparents life stories; they can then decide what they consider important and valuable for themselves and their own understanding of being East German and/or being from Eastern Germany (Bamberg 2011, 13).

A lot of the conversations about East Germany within families also evolve around the time after reunification and the challenges and changes that occurred within each family, mostly concerning the loss of jobs and the uncertainty of the future.

Respondent 9 says:

“When my parents talk about their East German past, they also talk a lot about the time after reunification. And I think some of the things that happened then still make them a little angry and frustrated even today. My parents weren't as affected from the changes after reunification as others, because they didn't lose their jobs for example but a lot of their friends and family members did. They also talk a lot about how they didn't like that for example many West German companies or West German politicians came to the East and just took over, instead of involving more people from the East.”

A lot of the respondents' parents and grandparents also seem to be actively engaged with their past by for instance requesting their *Stasi* documents. Female family members often talk about how much more emancipated women in the East were and also how much more equal to men. A lot of the female respondents also mentioned that hearing about their grandmothers and mothers being independent, always going to work and never considering being just a housewife had an impact on them and their understanding of female emancipation as well.

Respondent 2 says:

“My mom and grandma have always been working full-time, earning their own money and taking family and household decisions together with my dad and grandpa. I think for them it was always normal to be independent or emancipated and it also made them proud. Like in the East, there was just no question about it. At least that's how they're telling it. And I think they always scoff a little bit when they hear about women in the West, even nowadays, who don't go to work and are just dependent on their partners. And I think that influenced me quite a lot as well because I never even considered just staying at home and being dependant on someone else.”

This point illustrates well what Bamberg calls the “defining character” (2011, 13) of narrated stories that can impact the listeners identity. All of the participants also replied that their parents and grandparents would still call themselves East German. All of them also still differentiate between East and West and occasionally retort to calling people from the West “*Wessi*”, which in many cases is used to talk about them depreciatingly.

Respondent 2 says:

“My dad works in Bavaria with colleagues that are all from the West and sometimes he just says how different he feels from them. And if things at work wouldn't go according to plan or one of his colleagues would annoy him then sometimes he would say things like oh, that stupid Wessi has no clue about anything.”

Respondent 1 says:

“My dad likes to make jokes from time to time about West Germans, especially when he thinks they are being annoying or are talking badly about the East. I'm not even sure that he means it in a bad way, it just seems normal to him to make those jokes and maybe express his prejudices against West Germans in that way.”

When differentiations are made, it is thus mostly in a negative context or to highlight East German accomplishments and peculiarities. Negative traits that are attributed to West Germans are for instance being arrogant, being too rich or too posh. The majority of the respondents said that hearing their parents and grandparents talk like that impacted them by sometimes thinking

along those lines and within these categories as well, even if they do not want to attribute these characteristics to West Germans because it is not timely anymore to do so. The majority of respondents also mentions that their families, except for those family members who work in the Western states, have little to no contact to people living in the West of Germany due to a lack of family connections or friendships. Talks within families are not only about memories of events, but also about familiar foods and products. A lot of the respondents' families still buy the products and brands they know from East German times or that are now produced in Saxony and East Germany. Some of the participants acknowledged that this also influences their own buying behaviour and that they often buy the same East German products as their parents and grandparents. In that way, intergenerational narratives can establish a feeling of being connected to the past that influences the participants' daily life as well (Fivush et. al 2011, 337-38).

The respondents also mentioned that by talking about the topic openly in the interviews and being asked questions that they might not have thought intensely about before, they were creating their own narratives – remembering what their grandparents and parents told them as well as their own experiences and memories and then evaluating for themselves what is important to their own East German understanding. This process can then be referred to as identity construction through autobiographical narratives (Fivush et. al 2011, 337). The sociocultural model suggests that constructing a narrative identity takes time and the multiple retelling of stories aids in shaping said identity (McLean, Pasupathi and Pals 2007 in McAdams and McLean 2013, 235). In that way, the participants could use the interviews as a tool for the furthering of their own narrative identities.

What has not been explicitly mention in the research done on this topic before is how the generation born after 1990 would rank the importance of intergenerational narratives for their own identity construction. When asked about the importance of family stories for their own understanding of East Germany and their connectedness to the region and its history, the participants mentioned how hearing these intergenerational narratives contribute to feeling connected to the East. Being from the East is perceived as a part of their family history and therefore important. The sentiment of the majority of respondents concerning the impact of intergenerational narratives can be summed up in the following statement of respondent 1:

“I would say that stories within my family, mostly from my parents and grandparents, probably make up an important part about how I feel about East Germany and me being East German

and coming from East Germany. But I think more important than that is actually the public perception of East Germany and Saxony and how it is portrayed in the media. I think this has a much bigger impact than family stories, because talks within my family don't always evolve around East Germany, but it is a very present topic in the media."

5.2. Identity and media narratives

The respondents of this research perceive media narratives and discourses as well as the public perception that ensues from it as the most important factor contributing to their understanding of East Germany and an East German identity. When asked about media narratives concerning East Germany and Saxony, all respondents reacted in a similar way. They mentioned that they believe what the media reports about the region. Most of the examples mentioned concerned the media coverage of the "refugee crisis" starting in 2015, the increased success of the right-wing movement Pegida which originated in Dresden (Saxony), the increased popularity of the AfD, a populist, far-right party, as well as the increased violence and crimes against refugees and refugee centres. The respondents' acknowledge that while these crimes happen in East Germany and Saxony as well as in the Western states of the country, the media connects Saxony in particular to it. In that way, East and West are differentiated within media coverage. The focus on negative events in this case lays on East Germany and Saxony, a fact that both Kubiak and Rippl et. al describe as discursive degradation. According to Woderich, media and its narratives fall under the category of "*staged identities*" (1997, 87), thus portraying narratives that fit the story a media outlet wants to tell and emphasising what differentiates people and regions.

While the interviewees believe what the news report, they are critical towards the way in which the media portrays East Germany and Saxony. All respondents mention that they perceive the media discourse to be very selective, thus for instance when reporting about East Germany and Saxony, the focus usually lays on the regions' problems, but not their successes. A lot of the respondents wondered whether that is partly because the majority of newspaper staff is West German, since all national newspaper headquarters are located in the West. In that aspect, the participants alluded to what Krüger calls "cultural hegemony of West Germans" (in Rippl et. al 2018,2), thus the news being released in West Germany and with a West German perspective, which can then be seen as the norm. When viewed through the lens of internal orientalism, it can also be suggested that in this case West Germany is the more powerful region, using a negative media discourse to distinguish itself from East Germany, the perceived weaker region

(Johnson and Coleman 2012, 867). Coverage is also often perceived as generalising and lacking East German voices and perspectives.

Respondent 1 says:

“I remember one interview with a journalist and Thomas de Maizière [the former German Minister of the Interior] in which they were discussing the increased success of right-wing movements and the AfD in Saxony. And I just thought that it was strange, because both of them are West German but now live in Saxony. And I kept wondering why they invited those two and not people who actually grew up in Saxony and really know the region. It’s like they’re talking about the East, without involving people from the East.”

The respondents criticised to varying degrees that the media is selecting the narrative that fits the story they are trying to tell, even if it is generalising or one-sided. Media coverage is also often perceived as not representative enough; respondent 8 even suggested that ideally a quota for journalists from East Germany within every media outlet, similarly to quota’s for women, people with migration background or handicapped people, should be introduced.

The words that were mostly used when the respondents talked about media narratives and discourse were anger, shame, frustration and unfair; however, they also mentioned that the media coverage does not change their opinions about East Germany and Saxony. It is rather used to reflect and compare how the regions are portrayed in the media and how it feels like to actually live there.

These results can be explained through what Kubiak calls “*Fremdidentifikation*” and “*Selbstidentifikation*” (“*external identification* and “*self-identification*”; 2017, 36). By being defined negatively and in a certain way again one’s will (Branscombe, Ellemers, Doosje and Spears 1999 in Lui and Hilton 2005, 545) through media narratives, a self-identification process starts to differentiate what is portrayed and what is actually experienced. As a result, a stronger sense of belonging, in this case belonging to East Germany or being East German, emerges. This can also be seen in the answers of the majority of participants who mentioned that the negative media discourse rather makes them feel protective of the region and like wanting to prove that not everything in the East and in Saxony in particular is negative or as the media portrays it, by for instance insisting that “Not every Saxon is supportive of right-wing movements” or “Not every Saxon is against refugees”. Being East German will become

important to an individual's identity when that person can identify with the narrative connected to that identity. For this research this means that seemingly the more negative the media narrative about East Germany and Saxony, the more protective and connected the participants feel to it.

The participants also discussed the reactions that media coverages receive on social media in the comment sections. A lot of them admitted that they had to stop reading the comments because of the generalising and often degrading way in which news stories about the East and Saxony were received. A lot of the respondents mentioned reading comments that alluded to reunification being a mistake and wanting to build up the wall again that shocked them.

The literature review does not explicitly mention this, but a lot of the respondent also mentioned how the media often simplifies matters. Respondent 10 says:

“Media simplifies a lot of things. For example, when people vote for populist parties or join right-wing movements then for sure they have to be Nazis and racists. And I’m sure some people are. But that’s too easy. But many people like easy explanations for complicated matters. I wish there would be articles and coverages that would explain what motivates people in the first place to join these parties or movements. Coverage should be more complex.”

5.3. Identity and place

In the following section I will discuss the findings concerning identity and place. I wanted to know how strongly the participants feel connected towards the villages/cities and regions they live in. The findings mostly comply with what the previous research suggests; however, this section can also contribute a few, new aspects. The literature review suggests that women feel differently about their identities in relation to place, as place is usually connected to gender and traditional gender roles. (Taylor 2009, 39). According to the theory, women might also face difficulties in their identification with a place or their understanding of home should they deviate from the traditional norms a place might expect them to conform to (Taylor 2009, 70). In this research however, no significant differences in the answers between the female and male respondents could be found. None of the female participants brought up the connection between gender roles and place; even when directly asked about it they did not consider it to be applicable to them at this stage of their lives.

5.3.1. Perception of Heimat (home, the homeland)

What is considered Heimat varies greatly for the respondents. Heimat was more narrowly defined and more tied to one specific place for people who still live in the place that they grew up in or came back to after their studies. This can be explained through the “born and bred narrative” (Taylor 2009, 11), which attributes people who stay in the same place as multiple generations before them a stronger connection and possibility to identify with said place. Mulinari and Rathzel (2007, 110) suggest that through the born and bred narrative, the identity that is connected to a person’s Heimat is the main one; all other identities are subordinated to that one. For this research, this can certainly be said for the respondent’s identification with a specific place, thus their perception of their local identity.

Respondent 2 says:

“Heimat for me is the place where I grew up and where my parents live. That is the only place that I could consider Heimat.”

The participants who do not any longer live in the villages or cities they grew up in have a more fluid understanding of Heimat. The following response of respondent 1 illustrates that well:

“I live in Leipzig, so Leipzig means Heimat to me. I didn’t grow up there but I have been living there for many years now. The other day someone asked me where I was from and I even said that I’m originally from Leipzig, even though I grew up somewhere else. So I think Heimat is mostly the place where you live well and comfortably, have been living for the longest time and where you can also see yourself living in the future.”

One aspect of identity and place in connection to Heimat that previous research concerning an East German identity has not been paying closer attention to, is the affiliation to language and more specifically to dialects. During the interviews carried out for this research, the importance of dialects was brought up by the majority of respondents. Germany has a variety of different dialects and ways of speaking; in Saxony, a Saxon dialect is spoken that varies within the different regions of the federal state but is generally referred to as Saxon.

Respondent 1 says:

“A lot of people say that Saxon isn’t a very nice dialect or that it makes you sound stupid when you speak it. But I don’t really feel that way. For me the dialect has also always been connected to how friendly and helpful people from Saxony are. I started feeling like that a lot when I first moved to Leipzig to study and was new in the city. I always felt welcome and listening to a familiar dialect helped with that I think. It always has something melodic to me. Almost as if people are singing a little bit.”

Respondent 2 says:

“Hearing a Saxon dialect makes me feel like home. I always realise that when I’m outside of Saxony and then I hear someone speak the dialect. It’s a nice and comforting feeling to hear it. It also makes me feel like I belong to the region that I come from.”

Respondent 6 says:

“For me dialect is connected a lot to culture and tradition. Ever since I was a child I have been part of a Mundartgruppe [a group that regularly meets to practice traditional poems and songs in a region’s dialect]. For me it’s really important to keep the dialect alive, because it’s how I speak and it’s a part of me.”

All of these responses refer to the importance of the Saxon dialect either for their understanding of themselves or how it holds positive associations for them. The dialect strongly connects all respondents to a place. The participants also expressed frustration that their dialect is often ridiculed and portrayed as sounding stupid and were strongly arguing against that. Woderich refers to the enthusiasm and perceived importance of dialects as a part of “*staged identities*”, thus as a tool to set the speaker of the Saxon dialect apart from others (1997, 87).

5.3.2. Interplay of place identities

Within this research, I also wanted to find out how important being East German and/or being from East Germany ranks within the respondents’ overall understanding of themselves. Identity salience suggests that identities can be ranked according to a specific situation and context; during the interviews, I wanted to know how the participants would rank the following categories of places they can identify with: village/city, region within Saxony, Saxony as a whole, East Germany, Germany and Europe. It proved to be challenging for all respondents; however, a certain kind of pattern emerged, that followed the identity salience concept and can be summed up well in the answers of respondents 7 and 9 respectively:

“It’s really difficult to rank those identities because in the end they’re all applicable to me. So I think it really depends on the context. For example, if I meet someone from abroad, I would always say I’m German and then mention that I’m from Leipzig. But if I meet another German person then of course I would directly say Saxony or Leipzig. I also like Europe and being European but I think it’s too big and too abstract and isn’t important or apparent enough in everyday life.”

“I think it’s always easier to identify with something small. So I would probably always identify with Dresden first, because that’s where I live. If I’d meet a non-German person, I would first say that I’m German but then that I’m from Dresden, because I think the city is known outside of Germany as well. When the situation asks for it, I would also say that I’m Saxon or East German.”

These answers also illustrate well what has been suggested in the literature review – Germans at least within an inter-German context prefer identifying through their local and/or regional background rather than only a national one (Venske 2014, 51). East Germany as a whole has not been mentioned as being the most important place identity, neither in the inter-German nor international context. When following up on this, the participants mentioned that it feels too “abstract” or too “big” of a category to put it first within the ranking.

An aspect that has not been mentioned explicitly within the literature review can be found within the answer of respondent 1, who is connecting the territorial space with political meaning, being able to identify with a place in that way:

“Apart from the geography and where a place is located, I also find it important to see what kind of political association it has. For example, I live in Leipzig and Leipzig is generally known to be a centre for the left [Die Linke, a party on the far left of the political spectrum]. I think that’s great, because that is something that I can identify with very well and that’s why I think I can also identify with Leipzig as a city so well. Like this Leipzig has become home very quickly.”

Within the interviews, I also wanted to know what would need to happen for the respondents to leave Saxony or East Germany. This proved to be a difficult question, because Saxony and East Germany is the only place the respondents have lived in so far and as mentioned above they are strongly connected to it. A few answered that they could not imagine living anywhere else; the majority however said that it depends on the political development. For them, the reason to leave would be if the AfD would ever gain the majority and would be able to form a government by itself in the Saxon state parliament.

The results of this section have shown that while it is often discussed how identities can be firmly attached to place, when in a globalised world, places can be changed easily, Heimat and having a place to identify with and belong to are still of great importance for the participants’ identity and understanding of themselves.

5.4. Being East German or being from Eastern Germany

When asked the question whether the participants would identify as East German, the answers were divided. Eight out of the ten interviewees would say that they are East German, whereas only two would rather say that they are from Eastern Germany. I then asked to explain why the participants would answer the way they did. The ones that would identify as East German said that they feel East German and that it is important for them to state that clearly. When asked to

explain in more detail what exactly makes them feel East German, the respondents said that it was more of a sentiment that is difficult to explain and define. Being East German for them encompasses their connectedness to the place itself, to their family histories connected to it and the fact that they have always lived in East Germany. Respondent 3 also mentioned that he would always say he is East German, because by being East German he is part of a minority group that needs to be represented. The two respondents that said they would rather say they are from Eastern Germany instead of being East German explained it by stating that they associate the latter too much with the past, their parents past and GDR in general and that it did not seem timely anymore to identify as East German.

What can be said for all participants is that their generation seems to be actively engaged with the topic of an East German identity and being from Eastern Germany. This is often referred to as a direct result of the media coverage about East Germany and Saxony and the increased success of right-wing movements and the AfD since 2015. Those are seen as important and critical aspects for the participants to evaluate what it means for them to be Saxon and East German. None of them identifies with right-wing thoughts and ideology, yet the respondents feel that just by being from Saxony and East Germany, they are irrevocably connected to them in the public discussion and through media discourse.

Respondent 7 says:

“After the last national elections, when the AfD almost ended up as the strongest party in Saxony, I met with a group of people who study with me and a lot of them were from the western states. And they just couldn’t understand why people would vote for the AfD and that the party would never get such high percentages in the West and I felt like I had to make up explanations and justifications for the whole state, when I didn’t even vote for that party but it still felt like I was being criticised and judged for the actions of others, just because all of us are from Saxony.”

This answer also alludes to what the literature review and theory refer to as othering. When analysing the statement through that lens, it can be seen that the respondent’s friends from West Germany differentiate themselves through political differences and perceived moral superiority that are regarded as normal. The respondent is constructed as being different from that norm, simply by being from Saxony.

For many of the respondents, the upcoming parliamentary elections in Saxony in September 2019, in which the AfD is expected to compete for the majority of votes, are a reason to engage

themselves more actively politically and socially, by for instance attending demonstrations or joining political parties, not only because they do not agree with the presence of right-wing ideology within the state, but also because they want the public perception of Saxony to not only evolve around the successes of Pegida and the AfD but also show that other opinions exist within the state. All of the respondents mentioned that they did not engage that much with thinking about their East German identity but also the perception of Saxony within the rest of the country prior to 2015; the participants mentioned that year to be some kind of turning point, because it was the first year Germany opened its border for more than one million refugees which then lead to the increased success of Pegida and the AfD in all of Germany, but especially in Saxony (Engler and Hensel 2018a, 3-4). However, all respondents say that while these successes often leave them feeling ashamed and angry, it does not change their identity of being East German/being from Eastern Germany. Respondent 1 explains it in this way:

“Since 2015 a lot of things have gone wrong in Saxony, but I would never deny that I am East German or Saxon, because this is who I am and where I am from. Everything else would be arrogant.”

In terms of differences between East and West, all of the participants think that it will still take a very long time until both parts of the country will be equal and thinking in East/West categories will disappear. When asked about the most prominent differences, all respondents mentioned the unequal wages and how they perceive it as unfair that people in the East get paid less for the same kind and amount of work compared to their peers in the West. The participants mentioned how that negatively impacts people’s opinion of their country and themselves. There is the strong wish, that differences will be abolished in the future.

Respondent 9 sums it up by saying:

“I really hope that at some point we will be able to talk about Germany in more geographic terms than in only East and West. Now this seems funny and unimaginable but just think about it, then people in Munich [in former FRG] would be more East German than people in Erfurt [former GDR].”

6. Discussion

After having carried out this study, an East German identity remains challenging to define, just like East German identity scholars before had difficulties to pinpoint what exactly an East German identity is. The results of this research however provide several interesting insights into

how an East German identity is experienced. Some of them can be found within the existing research; however, some are particular to this study and have not explicitly been mentioned before. When talking about an East German identity in this chapter I will always use both terms, being East German and being from Eastern Germany, because this is how the participants referred to themselves. By choosing a narrower regional focus and interviewing people with a similar background, I wanted to see what other factors contribute to an East German identity; however, the results are mostly in line with what the previous research found, even if for it different target groups were used. For this thesis five women and five men have been interviewed to see if an East German identity has a gender dimension and is perceived and/or constructed differently. There were however no significant differences in their answers. The only aspect that all female respondents (and none of the male) mentioned was the fact that being an East German woman/ a woman from Eastern Germany reminds them of the advanced emancipation the East had in GDR times and how their mothers and grandmothers are role models in terms of being an independent woman.

For the generation born after 1990 there seems to be an understanding of their East Germanness that is divided into “before 2015” and “after 2015” or alternatively in the time before and after the increased successes and popularity of Pegida and the AfD and the resulting negative discourse in the media and the public sphere about the East. This thesis explored how the participants experienced being East German/ being from Eastern Germany in the time after 2015.

Being East German/from Eastern Germany means being aware of the past and the present. This awareness is mostly conveyed through intergenerational narratives. Awareness of the past includes their family stories and histories that create a connectedness to the past as well as acknowledging how differently their parents and grandparents grew up and lived. Awareness of the present refers to the having possibilities that the older generations did not have, being mindful about how the past, especially the time after reunification, still impacts East Germany today, being conscious about the economic disadvantages of living in the East and being aware of the differences that persist between East and West and sometimes still thinking in those categories. The generation born after 1990 however also has hope that disadvantageous differences between East and West will cease to exist in the future.

The previous research available on this topic refers to othering processes and negative media representation and degradation as the main factors influencing an East German identity. These aspects can be re-found in this study as well. Negative media coverage and the public perception of the East are mentioned to be the most important factors contributing to an East German identity. What has rarely been accounted for before however, is the activism and engagement that developed as a consequence of othering processes and media narratives. The respondents in this study mentioned that it is important for them to be more engaged politically and socially in order to not only prevent a further shift to the right within the East German and Saxon society but also to prove that not everything is as negative as the media reports. Negative reports serve as a reason to feel protective over East Germany and Saxony. In regards to media narrative and discourse, East Germanness is also shaped through a lack of East German voices and perspectives; thus a lack of representation.

Identities can be claimed by or attributed to someone – in the case of an East German identity it is both, showing that there is an interplay of being attributed and claiming an identity. By being negatively defined through the media, East Germans are attributed a certain identity. In turn they claim the identity in the way that is considered valuable for them. This follows the concept of external and self-identification that has been more closely analysed in the previous chapter. The respondents also mentioned that a negative media discourse does not change their feelings towards the East and would also not deter them from saying that they are East German/ from Eastern Germany. The majority of participants however also mentioned that if the government in Saxony would ever be formed by the AfD, they would leave the federal state. This shows on the one hand, that being East German/from Eastern Germany is an important part of the identity of the respondents, as negative media narratives rather enforce than extinguish it; however, it also illustrates that the loyalty and connectedness to a place has its restrictions. Whether an East German identity would remain once a change of place occurs could be an interesting topic for further research. Other than that, being East German/from Eastern Germany is linked to the perception of Heimat and place in general. All of the participants are closely connected to what they perceive as Heimat and thus are closely linked to a specific place. One aspect that all participants considered important regarding place and Heimat is the dialect they speak. It serves as a reminder of belonging and to varying degrees forms part of the respondents' identities.

An East German identity can be described as being part of a person's identity project. It is a continuous process that is subject to change and without a clear end (Taylor 2009, 41), just like the participants of this research are continuously adapting and changing their perception of what it means to be East German/from Eastern Germany. Engler and Hensel have asked within their research for how long there will still be East Germans (2018a, 8). They did not answer their own question – this research however has shown that at least for now being East German and having an East German identity are still important.

7. Conclusion

This thesis has explored how an East German identity is experienced and defined by the generation born after the German reunification in 1990. The research has shown that it remains challenging to define it; however, the analysed data has provided a detailed account for how it is experienced. The understanding of what it means to be East German/from Eastern Germany is dependent on multiple factors. Firstly, negative media coverage is said to be the most important aspect contributing to an East German identity. By being defined negatively and against one's will through media narratives, a self-identification process starts to differentiate between real life experiences and media portrayals. As a result, a stronger sense of being East German or belonging to the East develops. Media coverage is often perceived as generalising, one-sided and lacking East German voices and perspectives. Secondly, intergenerational narratives contribute to the participants' understanding and awareness of an East German past and present and the differences that still persist between East and West. Stories shared within families are often emotional and concern personal memories that create a connectedness to family history. By listening to the their parents' and grandparents' life stories, the participants of this research are able to decide which aspects they consider valuable and important for themselves and their own understanding of what it means to be East German. Thirdly, an East German identity is closely connected to place and the importance of Heimat. This study also found that identity and place are closely linked to language and dialects. In that way, dialects are used as a form of identification with and connectedness to a place.

An East German identity for the generation that was born after the German reunification in 1990 can best be referred to as being part of a person's identity project, as it is an on-going process that can continuously be changed and does not have a set end (Taylor 2009, 41). An East German identity for the participants of this research is connected to repeatedly adjusting their perception and understanding of what it means to be East German/from Eastern Germany.

Future research could focus more strongly on the importance of place for identity. The analysis and discussion chapter mentioned that the research participants are closely connected to the place they are living in/coming from and could only imagine leaving Saxony if the AfD would ever gain the majority in the Saxon state parliament. It could be interesting to study what will happen to identity connected to place, when one leaves the particular place an identity is connected to. Additionally, further research should be carried out on the interplay between intergenerational and media narratives by finding appropriate theoretical frameworks for it.

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Appendix

Interview guide

Interview date:

1. Introduction/Background

- Name
- Age
- Occupation
- Highest level of education
- Place of residence (is current place of residence same as where you grew up?)
- Where in GDR did your parents grow up?
- What are your parents' occupations?

2. Identity and (intergenerational) narratives

- Do your parents/grandparents openly talk about what it was like to grow up and live in GDR? If yes, which topics do they talk about and which stories do they tell?
- Do your parents, grandparents or other members of your family refer to the East and West (and people from there) still in these terms?
- Would your parents identify themselves as East German?
- Do they talk about Ostalgia or missing certain things from GDR?
- Do you talk to your parents about the differences that still exist about East and West? If yes, what are the most prominent things you talk about?
- Do you talk about how things changed (positively and negatively) since reunification and how it personally impacted members of your family?
- How does that influence you? Does that make you feel more connected to the past/to Saxony/to East Germany?

3. Identity and media discourse

- Do you think the East German states and Saxony in particular are well represented in the media? Do you as a person feel well represented? Represented in a way that is realistic and truthful to your experiences having grown up and living there? Or are there disparities or generalisations?
- Was there ever a time that being from East Germany/Saxony made you feel uncomfortable, angry and/or ashamed?
- How does negative media coverage about the East/ Saxony make you feel?
- Does this change the way you think about the East/ Saxony?
- Does that change the way you feel/act when meeting people who aren't from the East/Saxony? Do you think people judge you based on the fact that you're from Saxony?

4. Identity and place

- Is it important for you to identify with a specific place? (Where you live, where you come from, where your parents come from etc.)
- How important is Heimat (home, the homeland) to you?
- Is Heimat necessarily one specific place (or any territorial space at all?) or can multiple places be considered Heimat?
- Would you rather identify yourself with the village/city you come from and/or live in, the region, Saxony or Germany as a whole (or thinking further with the EU perhaps)?

Is there any identity that comes first/ is more important than the others or do multiple matter equally to you?

- Would you say that you are East German? Why/why not?
- Is being East German/being from Eastern Germany important to your overall identity?
- Could you imagine living somewhere else except for Saxony/ East Germany?
- What would motivate you to leave Saxony/ East Germany?

5. Concluding questions

- Do you yourself make any differentiations between East/West or between people from East/West? Do you think that is still relevant?
- How do you feel about the differences that still exist between East and West? Think about wage inequality, underdeveloped economic structures in the East etc.
- Do you think that this is a topic of interest for people your age?