

## Reflective paper: Changing conceptualisations of friluftsliv

### Introduction

In this paper, I reflect on my investigation into the concept of friluftsliv, the Norwegian term for outdoor life. The concept has been important to Norwegian identity and culture for the last century and has since the 1980s been instrumentalised as an area of policy (Hofmann et al., 2018; KLD, 1987). The study investigates how friluftsliv is conceptualised and how its meaning has changed as a reflection of social change.

In the first part of the paper, I present the rationale for the investigation and argue that more research is needed into the tensions and variations of friluftsliv. The second part reflects on the study's design: the research question, the mixed method design, and my ontological and epistemological position. In the third part, I reflect on the methods used and the advantages and challenges of combining documentary and digital humanities analyses (Boasson & Malvik, 2019; Martin, 2017). Finally, I conclude with reflections on the study's alignment and point to ethical challenges and implications for further study.

In the appendix, I include a few visualisations to illustrate the method.

### Friluftsliv – a study of conceptual change

The study of concepts is essential for understanding cultural and political change. As Cohen et al. (2017, p. 12) point out, “Concepts enable us to impose some sort of meaning on the world; through them reality is given sense, order and coherence”. Concepts not only synthesise ideas; they also describe institutions, activities, stakeholders and power relations. Kveim Lie et al. (2022) call for more study of conceptual change because concepts are crucial for how society is governed.

Literature on the concept of friluftsliv often points to four key influences. First, historians trace the concept's roots back to pre-modern society and the tradition of collecting food and resources from nature (Gelter, 2000; Olwig, 1995). Second, it is pointed to the romantic legacy from the 1700s and the ideas of explorers like Fritjof Nansen, who was vital for constructing a national identity of Norwegian as nature-loving people (Gelter, 2000; Gurholt, 2008; Repp, 2004). Third, the labour movement in the early 1900s embraced friluftsliv as an

ideal for workers as they got more free time, expanding the concept beyond the rural population and urban middle class (Tordsson, 2008). Fourth, friluftsliv was influenced by eco-philosophy from the 1970s, with Arne Næss as the principal figure. As pointed out by Breivik (2021, p. 430): “Naessian friluftsliv stands in contrast to the modern consumption and leisure culture with focus on guided tours, exotic experiences and luxury” (see also Crowley, 2013; Gurholt, 2008).

While many researchers end their historical exploration at this stage and argue for continued study of the philosophies of “founding fathers” (Breivik, 2021; Repp, 2004), empirical research on friluftsliv in the last decades followed different trajectories. One strand can be described as empirical-analytical and pragmatic, investigating participation in activities, tourism and conservation issues. Another strand focuses on pedagogical and cultural research within interpretivist and critical paradigms (Hertzberg et al., 2001; Skår, 2009; Aasetre & Gundersen, 2012).

Despite differences, the conceptual definitions of friluftsliv emerging in the literature from the 1990s onwards often draw on a mixture of philosophical, interpretivist and empiricist notions. Friluftsliv in Norway is often defined and promoted as a unique phenomenon, with high participation figures (“a lifestyle”), and informed by specific and distinct philosophies, typically worded in definitions such as the one by Beery (2013, p. 95):

Friluftsliv fuses ideas of outdoor recreation, nature experience, philosophy, and lifestyle. Outdoor recreation, as a term, is much simpler in scope than friluftsliv as it almost exclusively references specific activities and does not imply an inherent broader relationship to nature.

The idea that friluftsliv is more than just outdoor activity continues to be prominent. A recent monograph by Hofmann et al. (2018) argues that the definition of friluftsliv “covers all activities carried out in the open – if – and this is the determining factor – they are undertaken with the right attitude” (p. 23).

The conceptualisation of friluftsliv as an eco-friendly, inspirational and positive lifestyle appears hegemonic, internalised and naturalised (see Williams, 1986, p. 110). It is reiterated in social media, speeches, and descriptions of activities, used in Norwegian nation-branding (Caprioli, 2019), reflected overseas as inspiration for new educational practices (Knight et al., 2023) and commercialised in global lifestyle publishing. A search for friluftsliv in the Guardian

reveals titles such as “*The Norwegian secret: How friluftsliv boosts health and happiness*” (Dixon, 2023) and similar articles, pointing to friluftsliv as a lucrative inspirational trend.

As part of my literature review, I searched particularly for research critiquing and complicating such notions. More critical research is emerging, but more is needed. As noted in my proposal, researchers like Gurholt (2008) argue for more research into the contradictory aspects of friluftsliv, while Skille et al. (2023) argue that mainstreaming the concept ignores tensions and variations. The hegemonic understandings and practices of friluftsliv are criticised for ignoring class and gender differences (Humberstone & Gurholt, 2001), the indigenous Sami population (Skille et al., 2023), and the experiences of immigrants (Anderson, 2023; Anderson et al., 2023; Mickelsson, 2021). The survey methodology used to claim high participation is criticised for being imprecise about actual involvement (Crowley, 2013; Skår, 2009). While critical researchers recognise the vital legacy of friluftsliv, they point to essentialism, ethnocentrism and cultural blindness in the way it is described and promoted, and call for expanding research beyond the dominant paradigms (Gurholt & Haukeland, 2020; Skår, 2009; Aasetre & Gundersen, 2012).

I contribute to the critical tradition by investigating how the concept of friluftsliv is used and politicised, and argue for a more multidimensional understanding of friluftsliv.

## The design of the study and the research process

I turn now to the design of the study and the reflections on the research process. I discuss the research question, the mixed methods design, my ontological and epistemological position, and the type of knowledge produced by my investigation.

The research question initially chosen for the study was: *In what ways does friluftsliv in Norway respond to and reflect social change and societal challenges?*

According to Armour and Macdonald (2012), a good research question should be relevant to both the intellectual community and society. Mine is scientifically and socially important as it investigates hegemonic understandings of a key concept. Furthermore, it should be “clearly worded and have a single focus” and be feasible in considering time and resources (Armour & Macdonald, 2012, p. 10). My research question is clearly worded, but the first point of reflection is that it should be slightly tweaked to specify that my interest is *conceptual* change.

Concerning feasibility, the research question does not have a defined time frame. When I wrote the proposal, I was unsure what the archives would offer. The second point of reflection is that digitalisation enables historians to go far beyond the amount of material usually covered; as documents are turned into datasets, they can be quantified and used to visualise long-term developments (Boasson & Malvik, 2019; Sinclair & Rockwell, 2012). For the parts of the study relying on digital humanities, I could incorporate the entire history of the concept; however, I pragmatically set the time frame as one hundred years (1920s-2020s). For the parts of the study relying on conventional documentary analysis, the time frame from 1987 (the year of the first White paper on friluftsliv) to the present day was already quite long, and I needed to select what documents to include.

The second point of reflection concerns the character of the findings. As noted in my proposal, I use a parallel mixed method design (Cohen et al., 2017, p. 39), where the interpretive reading of documents is combined with the analysis of archived newspaper articles and visualisations enabled by digital humanities tools. Since the analysis yielded large amounts of data while the results had to be presented concisely in a poster, I selected two types of visualisations to represent the findings: A conceptual mapping of key themes linked with friluftsliv for the entire period (Galaxy) and a periodisation of how conceptualisation has changed in the last 40 years (Table).

The third point of reflection concerns my ontological and epistemological position and the type of knowledge produced by the study. Neither periodisation nor conceptual mapping is generalisable within an empirical-analytical paradigm. Periodisation is used in historiography to make events and developments understandable by placing them in distinct phases (Sato, 2001) and conceptual mapping places words in thematic clusters, but results are always disputable and demand reflexivity on the part of the researcher (Boasson & Malvik, 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To conclude this part, it is worth observing that both historical research and digital humanities have a history of paradigmatic controversy. Martin (2017) shows how history began as an empiricist discipline where rigorous examination of authoritative sources was seen to lead to “objective truth” (p. 324). Similarly, Boasson and Malvik (2019) describe the early pioneers of digital humanities as uncritically positivistic, seeing digital analysis as a way to overcome divisions between humanities and natural sciences (p. 149). In my study, both

close readings of documents and digital quantification are tools in a larger toolbox; neither gives definite answers but combining them can provide more valid results. Epistemologically, the study adopts a post-positivist position, “a pluralist view of multiple, coexisting realities rather than a single reality” (Cohen et al., 2017, p. 17).

## Methodological reflection

In the third part of the paper, I reflect on the benefits and challenges of the methods used to analyse documents, newspapers, and digitised archives.

In historical analysis, the selection and close reading of authoritative documents is the principal method (Martin, 2017). The three Government White Papers issued about friluftsliv in Norway (1987, 2000 and 2016) were selected as a starting point for this study. To include perspectives from the practice field, I selected documents from friluftsliv organisations for the same period, specifically evaluation reports from the “Year of Friluftsliv” organised in 1993, 2005 and 2015 (NEA, 2016; Vistad et al., 2006; Vaagbø, 1993). As a third source, I read news reports from the opening event in January of each “Year”, retrieved from the National Library.

At first, the method yielded little about conceptual change as the definitions of friluftsliv were similar across documents, there was a strong emphasis on continuity, and many of the activities represented were the same. In all three White Papers, friluftsliv is defined as “residence and physical activity in the open air during free time, to experience a change of environment and nature” [translated] (KLD, 1987, 2001; 2016, p. 10).

The first point of methodological reflection is how scientific procedures enable deeper investigations. My next step was inspired by inductive thematic analysis, although I did not adhere to the detailed procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Instead, my starting point was Martin’s (2017) observation that documentary analysis can look for omissions and implicit themes in the selected sources. Based on titles, key chapters, the phrasing of problems and solutions in summaries and introductions, as well as the locations depicted in the newspaper coverage of key events, significant changes emerged. For example, the value of spending time in “wild” nature became much less pronounced in the sources after the millennium, while quality of life and public health became more pronounced as expected outcomes of friluftsliv. The opening event of the “Year of Friluftsliv” changed from a remote

mountain area (1993), via an urban forest (2005) to a city park (2015). Hence, a second point of reflection concerns the value of comparisons; by surveying similar documents published in different decades, changes in the conceptualisations of friluftsliv emerged, which are not well documented in the literature.

From the digital humanities toolbox, I selected three methods to triangulate the results: Ngrams, galaxies and collocation analysis, each with its benefits and challenges.

Ngram is an app visualising how concepts rise and fall in public speech (Boasson & Malvik, 2019; Kveim Lie et al., 2022). The Ngram created for this study shows the relative frequency of the term friluftsliv in the digitised newspaper corpus (y-axis), visualising this as a historical timeline for the last one hundred years (x-axis) (Fig 1 in Appendix). The first reference to friluftsliv appeared in 1862, but the term did not take off until the 1920s, with a sharp rise in the post-war years. The Ngram supports the claim that friluftsliv is an increasingly important concept in Norwegian public life. It also adds weight to the results of the documentary analysis. The most distinct peak in the Ngram is in 1994, the year after the first "Year of Friluftsliv"; another distinct peak is in the third "Year" in 2015, while the 2005 "Year" is represented by a smaller peak. Hence, the digital analysis revealed how important promotional events are for keeping friluftsliv in the public limelight; based on the study, one can also hypothesise that another peak is forthcoming in the 2025 "Year".

To investigate the use of the term friluftsliv in the UK, I did a parallel Ngram based on Google's British-English literature corpus (Fig 2 in Appendix). The visualisation shows that the term friluftsliv rarely appeared in British English before 2010 but rose sharply afterwards, documenting that the concept has travelled overseas in the last decade.

Galaxy is the mapping tool I used to visualise themes linked with friluftsliv in the Norwegian newspaper corpus (Fig 3 in the Appendix shows the entire galaxy). Clusters of themes are sorted from the most to the least central; hence, galaxies are helpful for thematic analysis. In my study, it helps identify which of the elements often included in definitions of friluftsliv are central in public speech. The galaxy shows that standard terms used in most countries (related to sport, recreation and outdoor life) are more central than terms emphasising nature contact, connectedness and pro-ecological attitudes. Hence, the galaxy nuances the assertion that friluftsliv in Norway is entirely different from outdoor activities in other

countries (Beery, 2013; Hofmann et al., 2018) and points to the need for comparative research as a basis for asserting uniqueness.

The third method, collocation analysis, was used to study change. Collocations visualise words in the vicinity of a core term; in my case, I set the limit to ten words before and after *friluftsliv*, which is comparable to an average sentence (Kveim Lie et al., 2022). The analysis began with creating a corpus for each decade between 1920 and 2020; then I ran collocation analyses on each corpus to see if the words near *friluftsliv* changed over time. Since each corpus contained 2000 randomly selected occurrences of the term for each decade, I repeated the procedure to increase validity. There was substantial overlap between the corpora for each decade but not total correspondence. The analysis shows how many times more often a word appears within than outside the corpus, and the most frequent terms near *friluftsliv* in each corpus.

As expected from the galaxy analysis, terms related to sport and physical activity were most frequent in all decades, but there were also considerable differences. In the 1920s to 1950s, terms such as soundness (of mind and body), campfire, gymnastic and Bible lessons were prominent; from the 1960s to the 1980s, terms related to nature conservation dominated, only to become much less frequent later. Following the first White Paper on *Friluftsliv* in 1987, terms related to policy emerged, such as funding, municipal planning, local councils, and education. After the year 2000, terms related to nature experiences, culture, heritage, and socialisation became frequent, and in the last decade, terms emerged related to public health, inactivity, local greenspaces, and coastal zones. Triangulated against other findings, the collocations support the historical outline in the literature review and add new knowledge about the political instrumentalisation of *friluftsliv* in the last 40 years.

A second point of methodological reflection concerns the radical difference between my methods. While the main challenge in the documentary analysis was selecting documents and periodising themes and events, my debut as a digital humanities researcher left me a bit perplexed about the validity and reliability of the quantitative data. I attended a workshop and a tutorial at the National Library, and one programmer indicated that apps are still at Beta level. The often-mentioned reliability problems related to scanning mistakes (Younes & Reips, 2019) are being corrected, but the sampling methods and algorithms used by the apps are poorly documented (see also Boasson & Malvik, 2019). A final point of reflection is that

big data and AI-assisted tools offer innovative and time-saving methodologies, but academics may be unable to penetrate the exact procedures behind their findings.

## Conclusion, ethics, and implications for future work

While literature and definitions of *friluftsliv* tend to emphasise continuity and tradition, my study was designed to elicit political and social change. The study is located at the intersection of three paradigms: pragmatic, interpretive and critical (Lukenchuk & Kolich, 2013), and combines close reading of documents with quantitative analysis. Concerning the alignment of the study, the parallel mixed method design was appropriate for answering the (slightly tweaked) research question, a principal criterion for good research (Silverman & Bernstein, 2012). Furthermore, I could triangulate the results from different methods against each other, another critical criterion in qualitative analyses (Silverman & Bernstein, 2012).

While the study produced valuable results, it also illustrated the challenges of both documentary and digital humanities analysis. In the first case, it is challenging to pervade the masses of historical evidence and move beyond superficial findings; in the second, it is difficult to understand the exact procedures. Hence, both methods demand reflexivity and creativity, as well as adherence to the rigorous and formal procedures that characterise scientific inquiry (Armour & Macdonald, 2012).

Ethically, the study is low risk, but two concerns are relevant. The first is related to how digitisation facilitates the searchability of historical data. People interviewed by their local newspaper decades ago could not have foreseen that the information would be so readily available. Although the study has no formal participants, personal information must be treated with care. The second relates to the ideological and hegemonic understanding of *friluftsliv*, a phenomenon that many practitioners, volunteers, educators, and organisers care deeply about. Investigations into emotionally and culturally significant concepts require researchers to present results nuancedly.

Yet, critical research is essential, and the study aimed to produce evidence that could support a multidimensional conceptualisation of *friluftsliv*. This observation brings me to the final point: implications for future work and study. As a participant in and student of *friluftsliv*, I find it important to investigate potentially culture-blind and nationalistic conceptualisations. The analysis in this paper does not look for the essence of *friluftsliv* in

the philosophies of “founding fathers” or dedicated educators; instead, it focuses on how the concept is used in public speech to describe values, goals and activities. In this sense, the study has laid the foundation for further investigations into the changing nature of friluftsliv, and generated hypotheses that can be used for a potential study of the upcoming “Year of Friluftsliv” in 2025.

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All translations from Scandinavian languages are mine.

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## Appendix: Ngram and Galaxy

### NGRAM

*Fig. 1. National Library Ngram, friluftsliv. Corpus: Norwegian newspapers 1920-2020. The Y-axis shows the relative frequency of the term friluftsliv in relation to the entire corpus, while the x-axis is the historical timeline.*

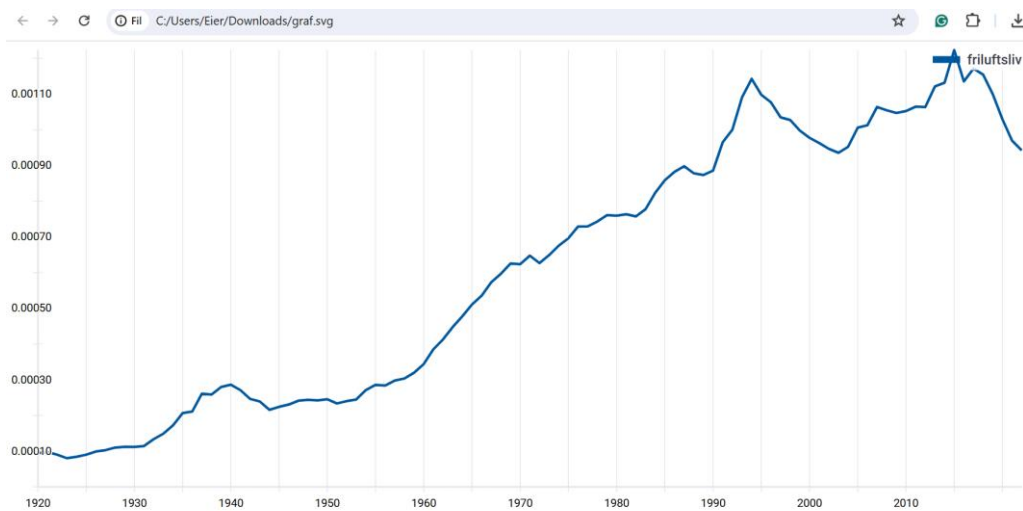


*Fig. 2. Google Ngram, friluftsliv. Corpus: Books in the British English language 1960s–today. The Y-axis shows the relative frequency of the term friluftsliv in relation to the entire corpus, while the x-axis is the historical timeline.*

