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Berichtgeving in Belgische kranten over Brussel als woonplaats

Joke Bauwens, Pascal Verhoest and Petrus te Braak



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EDITOR'S NOTE

To see the figures in a better resolution, open the article online and click on “Original” below them.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This research was partially funded by Innoviris and the Brussels Institute for the Encouragement of Scientific Research and Innovation (ISRIB) via two ANTICIPATE 2016 grants for the following studies: 1) *Residential environments and life perspectives: a multidisciplinary inquiry into housing aspirations and perceptions of living conditions in the Brussels-Capital Region (B-REL)* 2) *Brussels or rather not? A sociodemographic survey on the liveability of Brussels as a residential city (BRUXODUS)*.

Introduction

- 1 Brussels' negative portrayal in the media is frequently cited as an explanatory factor for the city's lack of appeal as a place to live [Corijn and Van de Ven, 2013; Loeckx *et al.*, 2014]. In general, the media play an instrumental role in place representation. As attention-focussing institutions, they mirror the cultural beliefs and knowledge that serve as a framework for public perceptions of cities [Green *et al.*, 2018; Wiard and Pereira, 2019]. Given that “images of places are solidly built over many decades [and

media seem more capable of recognising Brussels' specificity and diversity [Wiard and Pereira, 2019]. Similarly, citizen media initiatives offer a more constructive portrayal of Brussels' composite identity as a place to live whilst raising awareness of issues ignored by mainstream news outlets [Wiard and Simonson, 2019].

- 10 In addition to this literature, three recent studies – BruVoices [Van Brussel *et al.*, 2018], B-REL [Schillebeeckx *et al.*, 2020; Verhoest *et al.*, 2022] and BRUXODUS [te Braak *et al.*, 2022] – delve deeper into the lived experience, image and perception of the city as a living environment. These research projects were carried out independently, employed different methodologies and involved people with different degrees of attachment with the city: BruVoices interviewed inhabitants of Brussels; B-REL involved residents, people who had left the city or never lived in Brussels; BRUXODUS compared people who left Brussels with those that stayed. Nevertheless, there was considerable overlap in their findings with all three studies demonstrating polarised opinions on Brussels as a place to live. On one end of the spectrum, we find those who appreciate Brussels' international, multicultural and cosmopolitan character, enjoy its liberal atmosphere, and view diversity as a source of vibrancy, charm, and enrichment. Brussels' lively social and cultural scene and array of amenities are often listed as plus points. On the other are their opposite numbers, those who associate the city with pollution, traffic, poor infrastructure, insalubrity, tensions between ethnic groups, weak governance, crime and chaos.

2. Study design

- 11 Assuming a degree of reciprocity between public perceptions of Brussels as a place to live and media representation of the city, we were interested in the extent to which news media produce and reproduce these tension fields. Our objective was thus to explore how people's views on and lived experiences of Brussels are reinforced or contradicted by daily news coverage of the city. To do so, we coded newspaper content according to the concepts identified in the B-REL study [Verhoest *et al.*, 2022] reflecting people's (n=180) perceptions of Brussels as a living environment (see Table 1). We supplemented this codebook with 12 new concepts drawn from the press (marked with *)¹. It is important to note that all concepts identified in the perception study were also found in the newspaper analysis.

Table 1. Concepts associated with "living in Brussels" identified in at least 10 % of Dutch- or French-language articles

Concepts	Description	Frequency
Policy (-)	Negative references to policies that affect life in Brussels	101
Poverty	Poor and miserable living conditions (e.g., impoverished inhabitants, low-income residents, houses standing empty, squats, unemployment, decay, deprivation, homelessness)	98
Criminality	Crime, criminal activity and criminal offences; criminals in and from Brussels; vandalism; aggression; violence; drug use	80

Multicultural (-)	Negative references to multicultural life (e.g., crime, terrorism, social exclusion, discrimination, racism, language problems, deprivation)	73
Social life	Social cohesion and respect amongst inhabitants; Brussels as a warm and open place; social justice, kindness and solidarity; friendship; social contact	64
Leisure	The range of leisure activities available: pubs and restaurants; social scene; bar scene; cultural scene	52
Terrorism*	Terror and terrorists in and from Brussels; fear of terror; military presence in Brussels; terrorist threats	51
Multicultural (+/-)	Neutral references to multicultural life (e.g., statistics, allusions to non-Belgian origin, use of the word “multicultural”)	48
Citizen initiatives*	Grassroots initiatives, actions and campaigns launched by inhabitants; civic action both for and against public policy	47
Pleasant	Brussels as a pleasant place to live with a nice atmosphere; the city’s historical character; beautiful areas, neighbourhoods, and views	47
Policy (+)*	Positive references to policies that affect life in Brussels	45
Multicultural (+)	Positive references to multicultural life [e.g., cultural scene, tolerance, friendship, respect, learning opportunities, harmony]	41
Language*	Language diversity and language-related issues; the bilingual nature of the city	30
Busy	The hectic and chaotic nature of a city in terms of population density and overcrowding	26

- 12 To ensure a balanced representation of Belgian newspapers and a sufficiently large enough number of news items for statistical analysis, we employed a stratified sampling procedure based on language community, newspaper profile and year of publication.
- 13 Both language community and newspaper profile can be seen as critical differentiators in newspaper coverage on life in Brussels. It has been argued that the French-language press has a significantly larger audience in Brussels than the Dutch-language press, and for that reason probably displays a greater affinity towards everyday city life in Brussels [Loeckx *et al.*, 2012]. International research also suggests that geographical proximity of news media and journalists with the cities they write about, contribute to more nuanced portrayal of these places [Avraham, 2000; Gutsche, 2014]. Given that most of the French-language newspapers are still based in Brussels whilst most Dutch-language newspapers have moved out of the city², it can be assumed that French-language newspapers have more affinity with everyday life in Brussels. A second, typical level of comparison in Belgian news coverage research that we incorporated in our research is elite versus popular newspapers, which are often found different from each other.

- 14 In this vein, we selected two elite newspapers from each language community (*De Morgen*, *De Standaard*, *La Libre Belgique*, and *Le Soir*); all of which tend to accurately reflect public opinion, publish more hard-news items (politics and economy) and target readers with a higher socioeconomic status [Beckers *et al.*, 2019; Antoine, 2016]. We also selected four newspapers with a more popular profile (*Het Laatste Nieuws*, *Het Nieuwsblad*, *L'Avenir*, and *La Dernière Heure*); these newspapers have a more middle-market readership and containing relatively more soft-news items than their elite counterparts [Maesele and Schuurman, 2008].
- 15 Given our interest in frames that persist over time, we sampled articles published in 2011, 2013, 2015 and 2017, covering a total period of seven years. We aimed for 25 journal articles from each year and from each newspaper, including news stories, op-eds and columns. Assuming that the 2016 terrorist attacks would distort typical press coverage of life in the city, we opted to exclude articles from this year. However, it was impossible to omit all references to terrorism. The Brussels lockdown (21 November to 25 November 2015) in the aftermath of the Paris terrorist attacks affected news coverage of Brussels in the final weeks of 2015 whilst several articles from 2017 alluded to the implications of the terrorist attacks on everyday life in Brussels.
- 16 All 800 text units were retrieved from the online database GoPress Academic using a keyword search on “living in Brussels”³. Twenty articles from the original selection were deemed invalid during coding due to the absence of any overt commentary on Brussels as a living environment (see Table 2: coding sample). All newspaper articles were coded using qualitative data-analysis software. Validity and inter-coder reliability were assured via coder training and meetings where differences in interpretations were discussed.

Table 2. Newspaper sample (in absolute figures)

	Coding sample (n= 780)	Sample for multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) (n= 279)
<i>De Morgen</i>	100	43
<i>De Standaard</i>	99	47
<i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i>	100	40
<i>Het Nieuwsblad</i>	100	30
<i>L'Avenir</i>	95	22
<i>La Dernière Heure</i>	97	20
<i>La Libre Belgique</i>	97	41
<i>Le Soir</i>	92	36

- 17 Given our interest in broader cultural schemes about life in Brussels, we were not so much interested in standalone concepts as in the relationships between concepts that

housing, public spaces, and safety. In addition, language-related issues, concern over poverty and deprivation, and a neutral view of multiculturalism feature in the bottom two quadrants.

- 23 Surprisingly, both the French- and Dutch-language newspapers are located in the middle of the field. This outcome is contrary to previous research which has suggested that the Dutch-language press tends to frame news of Brussels in a more polarised and negative way. Our analysis indicates that there is no significant difference between Dutch- and French-language newspapers in the way that they combine lead concepts into distinct positive and negative frames regarding Brussels as a place to live.
- 24 Rather, the main aggregate difference between the newspapers lies in the elite versus popular orientation. Elite newspapers such as *De Morgen* (DM), *De Standaard* (DS), *La Libre Belgique* (LLB) and *Le Soir* (LS) – all located in the bottom half of the map – tend to approach city life from a political, governmental or policy-based perspective. One could claim that their content is more varied than that of their popular counterparts, given that they offer a more balanced view of policy and a less partisan approach to issues linked to multiculturalism. Amongst the popular titles, *Het Laatste Nieuws* (HLN) pays the most attention to everyday life in the city and the least to policy; and in doing so differs the most from its elite counterparts, in particular the French-language elite press. Other popular newspapers, such as *Het Nieuwsblad* (HNB), *L'Avenir* (LA) and *La Dernière Heure* (DH) are located towards the middle of the field, indicating an average position across both dimensions.
- 25 There are no significant differences between elite and popular newspapers in terms of positive or negative framing of Brussels as a place to live. The MCA suggests that *De Morgen* (DM) writes more critically about life in Brussels than any other newspaper. This is surprising given its discerning, cosmopolitan readership. One possible explanation for its position on the map is the newspaper's somewhat outspoken style and the large number of op-eds it publishes.

Conclusion

- 26 We began our inquiry with the aim of combating the deficit of empirical studies on media portrayal of Brussels as a place to live. Given that Brussels' city branding operations pay relatively little attention to the image of the city as living environment, media narratives are still likely to be the most important non-intentional source of urban marketing. Expanding on previous research in which we looked at people's actual perceptions of the city [Verhoest *et al.*, 2022], we aimed to investigate in this article how day-to-day media coverage of life in Brussels resonates with commonly held cultural schemata about Brussels as a place to live.
- 27 Our results revealed two main frames. The first corresponds with phobian perceptions of Brussels, highlighting the negative aspects of the city as a living environment due to crime, social exclusion, discrimination, racism, lack of integration and deprivation. This frame is linked to politics and policy through current substandard living conditions and impoverished inhabitants. This problematic image of Brussels is diametrically opposed to the second frame in the press that resonates strongly with cosmopolitan perceptions of the city. Said frame offers a positive view of city life in terms of its cultural capital, social scene, and pleasant atmosphere. These themes can be linked to concepts including respect, tolerance, and an appreciation for

multicultural societies. However, this frame could be viewed as somewhat reductive, given that it paints quality of life as the product of the number of entertainment and leisure opportunities on offer.

- 28 Consistent with the literature, we can thus say with certainty that the links between the various concepts point towards relatively robust frames on Brussels as a living environment with the Belgian press oscillating between two opposing views of the city. This Janus-faced representation of Brussels as a living environment corresponds to disparate public perceptions of city life, that newspapers seem to reinforce. However, in contrast to earlier work, our research shows that there is no significant aggregate difference between the Dutch-language and French-language press in terms of how they combine lead concepts into frames. Rather, newspaper type seems to be a more accurate differentiator in the way press coverage on life in Brussels is constituted. Popular newspapers are significantly more likely to focus on everyday events and topics than their elite counterparts without ever discussing the related policy. In accordance with Loeckx *et al.* [2012], one image that appears to be lacking in Belgian press coverage of Brussels is that of a city that is concerned about its residents and of a place where inhabitants are engaged with their surroundings.
- 29 Finally, in line with previous research, this study has zoomed in on mainstream news narratives as critical drivers in the construction of social knowledge on Brussels because of their wide reach. Further work is required to learn if other forms of media and culture challenge the mainstream cultural narratives and social stories about the livability of Brussels. For example, local Brussels media such as *BRUZZ* and citizen publications that were not included in our research may contribute to filling this gap. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether their reach is sufficient enough to replace the polarised portrayal of Brussels in the mainstream media with more nuanced stories of life in Brussels that go beyond an anti-urban image of city life, on one hand, and a pro-urban view of Brussels in terms of pleasure and thrill-seeking. If we want to prioritize cultural narratives with wide appeal in society, the rich and expansive domain of imaginaries of Brussels in popular culture and entertainment, such as films, television series, music, celebrities and influencers, probably deserves more of our research attention.

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APPENDIXES

MCA of reported concepts

				Dimension 1			Dimension 2		
	Mass	Quality	% inertia	Coordinates	Correlation ²	Contribution	Coordinates	Correlation ²	Contribution
Active variables									
Poverty									
Not named	0,046	0,643	0,012	0,275	0,138	0,003	0,847	0,506	0,033

Named	0,025	0,643	0,022	-0,507	0,138	0,006	-1,565	0,506	0,061
Criminality									
Not named	0,051	0,752	0,036	1,008	0,680	0,052	-0,529	0,072	0,014
Named	0,020	0,752	0,090	-2,507	0,680	0,129	1,315	0,072	0,035
Policy [-]									
Not named	0,046	0,625	0,024	0,637	0,360	0,019	0,880	0,265	0,035
Named	0,026	0,625	0,043	-1,123	0,360	0,033	-1,551	0,265	0,062
Terrorism									
Not named	0,058	0,780	0,012	0,503	0,584	0,015	-0,469	0,196	0,013
Named	0,013	0,780	0,054	-2,250	0,584	0,066	2,097	0,196	0,057
Multicultural [-]									
Not named	0,053	0,675	0,044	0,956	0,514	0,048	-0,862	0,161	0,039
Named	0,019	0,675	0,125	-2,697	0,514	0,136	2,432	0,161	0,111
Leisure									
Not named	0,058	0,674	0,020	-0,633	0,547	0,023	-0,492	0,128	0,014
Named	0,013	0,674	0,088	2,761	0,547	0,102	2,146	0,128	0,061
Multicultural [+/-]									
Not named	0,059	0,532	0,008	-0,037	0,004	0,000	0,636	0,528	0,024
Named	0,012	0,532	0,040	0,176	0,004	0,000	-3,063	0,528	0,115
Pleasant									
Not named	0,059	0,750	0,018	-0,650	0,645	0,025	-0,420	0,104	0,010
Named	0,012	0,750	0,091	3,206	0,645	0,124	2,072	0,104	0,052
Social life									
Not named	0,055	0,628	0,019	-0,662	0,612	0,024	-0,173	0,016	0,002
Named	0,016	0,628	0,063	2,223	0,612	0,081	0,583	0,016	0,006
Busy									
Not named	0,065	0,271	0,001	-0,104	0,230	0,001	-0,071	0,041	0,000

Named	0,007	0,271	0,014	1,016	0,230	0,007	0,691	0,041	0,003
Multicultural [+]									
Not named	0,061	0,898	0,007	-0,390	0,669	0,009	-0,368	0,229	0,008
Named	0,010	0,898	0,023	-0,133	0,004	0,000	-1,220	0,134	0,017
Policy [+]									
Not named	0,060	0,139	0,004	0,026	0,004	0,000	0,235	0,134	0,003
Named	0,012	0,139	0,023	-0,133	0,004	0,000	-1,220	0,134	0,017
Language									
Not named	0,064	0,580	0,006	-0,062	0,021	0,000	0,517	0,559	0,017
named	0,008	0,580	0,046	0,519	0,021	0,002	-4,290	0,559	0,141
Citizen initiatives									
Not named	0,059	0,452	0,008	-0,342	0,393	0,007	0,212	0,059	0,003
Named	0,012	0,452	0,041	1,686	0,393	0,034	-1,048	0,059	0,013
<i>Passive variables</i>									
Newspaper title									
DM	0,154	0,044	3,230	-1,155	0,030		-1,274	0,014	
DS	0,168	0,001	3,303	-0,093	0,000		-0,227	0,000	
HLN	0,143	0,059	3,880	-0,057	0,000		2,748	0,059	
HNB	0,108	0,000	3,464	-0,084	0,000		0,260	0,000	
LA	0,079	0,004	3,435	-0,469	0,003		0,456	0,001	
DH	0,072	0,004	3,415	0,029	0,000		1,047	0,004	
LLB	0,147	0,022	3,484	0,907	0,016		-0,869	0,006	
LS	0,129	0,026	3,429	0,888	0,014		-1,323	0,012	
Language group									
Dutch	0,573	0,015	3,290	-0,368	0,011		0,327	0,003	
French	0,427	0,019	3,402	0,494	0,015		-0,439	0,004	

NOTES

1. Most of these concepts are not listed in Table 1 as their frequencies are below 10 %.
2. From the Dutch-language newspapers analysed in this study, none of them had their editorial office in Brussels in the selected time period. *De Standaard* has relocated to the city centre of Brussels in 2020. *De Morgen*, *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *Het Nieuwsblad* are all located in Flanders. Of the selected French-language newspapers in this study, only *L'Avenir* is not based in Brussels.
3. Articles were deemed relevant if they learned something on how life in Brussels looks like and the inhabitants of the city. Note that articles that did not have “living in Brussels” as their main topic, were also considered as they could contribute to the image of Brussels as a living environment. The sampling of the newspaper articles consisted of minimum one to maximum three searching rounds, depending on how quickly the number of articles was reached. In the first round, we searched first by the exact phrase “living in Brussels” (in Dutch: “leven in Brussel” – in French: “vivre à Bruxelles”). This search term corresponded with the question we had asked to the 180 participants in the B-REL study. Since the Brussels Capital Region consists of 19 municipalities, we decided to use this search term for all 19 municipalities and their name variants. Secondly, we searched by the exact phrase “residing in Brussels” (in Dutch: “wonen in Brussel” – in French: “habiter à Bruxelles”). Again, this was checked for all 19 municipalities and their name variants. In the second round, the same search terms were used, but this time not as exact phrase. As soon as an article mentioned “living residing in Brussels (and the other municipalities)”, not necessarily in that order or in the same sentence, it was retrieved and checked on relevance. In the third and final round, the search terms were “Brusselian, Brusselians” (in Dutch: “Brusselaar, Brusselaars” – in French: “Bruxellois”). One of these words sufficed. This search term produced a lot of noise, as it is often used to denote sporting clubs from the Brussels area (for example the football club RSC Anderlecht). Finally, all doubles that were retrieved in the separate search rounds, were removed from the sample. Three researchers were involved in this relevance sampling stage. They conferred at regular intervals on the relevance of the selected textual units. The sampling turned out to be a time-consuming process. Given Brussels’ role in politics, a significant number of articles make mention of Brussels, without actually discussing aspects of its inhabitants’ daily life experiences and Brussels as a living environment. Also, we noticed that a large portion of the news coverage that reported about the refugee crisis (a topical subject in newspapers at that time) as well as crime and justice (long-lived popular subjects in the press) also speaks about Brussels. Hence, from the pile of retrieved articles, only a small fraction explicitly referred to the inhabitants of Brussels and daily life in Brussels, either from the side (peripherally) or centrally.

ABSTRACTS

Brussels’ overwhelmingly negative depiction in the press is a frequently mentioned but little researched factor in explaining its lack of appeal as a place to live. This study examines how city life is framed in Belgian newspapers as well as how said frames resonate with broader cultural schemes that influence public perceptions. Using multiple correspondence analysis, we found that the press by and large groups concepts into two diametrically opposed frames: the first corresponding to a *phobian* perception of Brussels that centres on the negative aspects of city life and the second to a *cosmopolitan* view of the capital that focusses on its vibrant nature and other

inherent advantages. Furthermore, differences between newspapers in their portrayal of life in Brussels relate more so to their orientation (elite versus popular) rather than to their language (Dutch versus French).

L'image extrêmement négative de Bruxelles dans la presse, souvent citée comme un facteur expliquant le manque d'attrait de la ville en tant que lieu de vie, fait rarement l'objet de recherches. Cette étude porte sur la façon dont les journaux belges présentent la vie bruxelloise, ainsi que sur la façon dont ces représentations sont corrélées à des schémas culturels plus généraux qui influent sur les perceptions de la population. Une analyse des correspondances multiples nous a permis de constater que dans l'ensemble, la presse regroupe des concepts pour forger deux représentations diamétralement opposées : la première correspond à une perception « phobique » de Bruxelles, centrée sur les aspects négatifs de la vie citadine, tandis que la seconde traduit une vision « cosmopolite » de la capitale, l'accent étant mis sur son dynamisme et sur d'autres atouts qui lui sont propres. En outre, en matière de description de la vie bruxelloise, les différences entre les journaux tiennent davantage à leur orientation (élitaire ou populaire) qu'à la langue de publication (néerlandais ou français).

De zeer negatieve afbeelding van Brussel in de pers wordt vaak aangehaald als factor in de verklaring waarom de stad niet zo'n aantrekkelijke plek is om te wonen, maar is amper empirisch onderzocht. Deze studie onderzoekt hoe het stadsleven wordt beschreven in Belgische kranten en hoe de gehanteerde frames resoneren met bredere culturele schema's die de percepties van mensen over Brussel beïnvloeden. Aan de hand van een meervoudige correspondentie analyse ontdekten we dat de krantenberichtgeving twee tegenovergestelde frames gebruikt: het eerste frame stemt overeen met een *fobische* perceptie van Brussel, waarbij de focus ligt op de negatieve aspecten van de stad, en het tweede met een *kosmopolitische* kijk op de hoofdstad, die gericht is op het bruisende karakter en andere troeven van de stad. Bovendien hebben de verschillen tussen kranten in hun afbeelding van het leven in Brussel meer betrekking op hun oriëntering (elitaïr versus populair) dan op de taal waarin ze artikelen publiceren (Nederlands versus Frans).

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