

## Belgian newspaper coverage on Brussels as a place to live

Bauwens, Jo Renate; Verhoest, Pascal; Te Braak, Petrus

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*La couverture de Bruxelles en tant que lieu de vie par les journaux belges*  
*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

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## 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

are] not something volatile and transient that can be pushed around at will by external agents” [Anholt 2009: 31], it has been argued that media often contribute to the perpetuation of historically negative place images in spite of objectively positive changes to said places [Avraham, 2000; García, 2005].

- 2 Recent urban marketing campaigns have highlighted Brussels’ cultural and economic benefits as a place to live. Initiatives such as Women in Brussel, Sprout to be Brussels, Brukselbinnenstebuiten and Vivre à Bruxelles aim to draw attention to Brussels’ positive attributes in terms of residents’ quality of life. Their primary goal is to upgrade the city’s image amongst inhabitants and to attract new residents from further afield. However, these campaigns have also thrown Brussels’ negative image into sharp relief, and they remain fragmented and limited in scope. Efforts to homogenise disparate place marketing actions since 2012 have seen the creation of the baseline and logo “.brussels” and the establishment of centralised agencies such as visit.brussels and hub.brussels [Mabillard, 2021]. Fully in line with the Brussels International Development Plan, these new initiatives mainly target tourists, expatriates and businesses, prioritising Brussels’ international brand and its touristic and economic appeal [Decroly and Van Criekinging, 2009]. This suggests that for locals media and popular culture remain powerful suppliers of meaning and knowledge about Brussels as a place to live.
- 3 Cultural narratives are believed to play a key role in placemaking, in particular for cities that suffer from a problematic image in terms of quality of life, such as urban flight, unemployment, and crime [Boland, 2008]. Because news media is a primary way in which these cultural narratives or social stories are perpetuated, we want to focus on the role of day-to-day newspaper coverage in constituting and emphasising particular aspects of city life. The study presented in this article draws on cognitivist theories on the role of media as meaning-making institutions that both generate and mirror collective cognition and social representation, particularly in regard to perceptions of cities [see for example Georgiou, 2013; Holloway and Hubbard, 2013]. We therefore build on previous research in which we investigated perceptions of Brussels and found that the mental representations or “cultural schemata” shared by people can be boiled down to concrete associations of anti- and pro-urban ideas regarding city life [Verhoest *et al.*, 2022]. Assuming a degree of reciprocity between public perceptions of Brussels as a place to live and news media representation of the city, the aim of this article is to examine how Brussels is framed as a place to live in the Belgian press, and how these frames resonate with people’s (pre)conceptions of the city.
- 4 This article is divided into four main parts: the first section briefly discusses the existing academic literature and research into the perceived identity of Brussels whilst the second outlines the data and methodology employed in the study. The third section zooms in on newspaper frames and how they can be understood as powerful drivers of public attention. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion of the empirical findings in relation to public perceptions of Brussels as a place to live.

## 1. Brussels’ image

- 5 It has been argued that one of Brussels’ major problems is its relatively weak identity and personality and absence of a well-defined image [Rea, 2013; Corijn and Vloeberghs, 2013]. Compared with other European metropolis such as Berlin, Paris and London,

Brussels is said to lack presence on the world stage and has no easily identifiable narrative or backstory [Acke and Bekers, 2016]. Concerted efforts to promote the city in recent years (e.g., via the marketing initiatives mentioned above) can be considered as attempts to tackle this issue and to create a more consistent and cohesive image of Brussels.

- 6 Many scholars have highlighted the multiple paradoxes and juxtapositions that characterise Brussels' image. The city's historical standing as a command centre, a seat of political, institutional and economic power, and a stronghold of international governance and diplomacy have all contributed to Brussels' relative prestige [Acke and Bekers, 2016; Vandenbroucke, 2016]. However, this positive image is often undermined by phenomena such as rampant property development, failed urbanisation projects, lifeless bureaucratic neighbourhoods, vehicle pollution and traffic jams and in recent years, gentrification [Rea, 2013; Corijn, 2013; Corijn and Vloeberghs, 2013].
- 7 Another of Brussels' innate paradoxes lies in its appeal to the diverse sections of society who have chosen it as a place to live. On the one hand, Brussels has historically been viewed as a magnetic place for political dissidents, critical thinkers and cultural outlaws [Acke and Bekers, 2016; Rea, 2013]. This is echoed in recent positive cultural imagery of the city as a "creative home port", appreciated by artists for its famous spirit of freedom, unruliness and lived diversity [Reverseau, 2019]. Its appeal to highly educated workers has equally contributed to its prestigious cosmopolitan image [Van Parijs, 2013]. Conversely, Brussels has become synonymous with inequality and segregation [Vandenbroucke, 2016]. The image of a city characterised by deep class divisions and increasing social polarisation – particularly between the international elite (expats, diplomats, businesspeople, intellectuals) and low-wage migrants and refugees – is one which is hard to shake [Rea, 2013; Corijn, 2013; Vandenbroucke, 2016].
- 8 Despite concern over Brussels' image amongst academics and policy-makers, there is a noticeable lack of empirical investigations into the city's representation in the media. To our knowledge, the work of Loeckx *et al.* [2012; 2014] and Wiard and Pereira [2019] are rare examples of systematic analysis of the role played by the Belgian news media in the construction of Brussels' image. Both studies point to polarising media coverage that reinforces existing stereotypes and perpetuates the city's fragmented image. The media's negative bias is evident in the abundance of dramatic and sensationalist online news content pertaining to crime and other social ills linked to politics, economy and mobility. The working-class neighbourhoods in the west of the city, dubbed the "poor crescent", are also commonly associated with issues related to multiculturalism and immigration [Wiard and Pereira, 2019]. In a similar vein, legacy media frame the city as the product of poor governance; characterised by traffic, inequality and polarisation of public opinion [Loeckx *et al.*, 2012]. Nevertheless, both the Loeckx and Wiard and Pereira studies also point to counter-frames. For example, Brussels is often portrayed as the only truly cosmopolitan city in Belgium, a vibrant cultural capital [Wiard and Pereira, 2019] and an attractive, tolerant, and exciting metropolis enriched by its diversity [Loeckx *et al.*, 2014].
- 9 Mindful of the variety of media available to news consumers, these studies suggest that Dutch-language newspapers are more polarised in terms of content and tend more towards negativity than their French-language counterparts [Loeckx *et al.*, 2012]. Frames that allow for identification and involvement with the city as a community are generally lacking in legacy news coverage [Loeckx *et al.*, 2014]. However, local online

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 \*). 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 city<sup>2</sup>, 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”<sup>3</sup>. 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



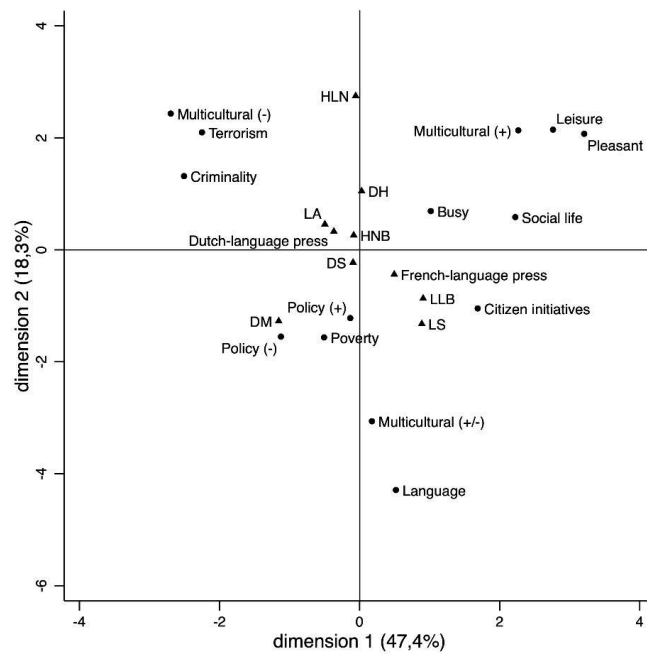
together create frames. We therefore turned our attention to press articles that contained more than one coded concept to assess patterns of cooccurrence in newspaper stories. To eliminate concepts that were mentioned in passing, we retained only the concepts that appeared in at least 10 % of Dutch or French-language articles containing at least two of the concepts from Table 1. The 10 % threshold was also applied in the B-REL study cited above. Below that threshold, the occurrence of concepts declines to statistically insignificant numbers. This resulted in a sample size of 279 units (see Table 2: MCA sample).

- 18 A multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) was then carried out using the 279 articles. MCA is an exploratory data-analysis technique used to visualise multivariate categorical data – in this case, the different concepts identified in the content analysis. Similar to a factor analysis, the MCA condenses concepts into dimensions, but uses categorical rather than factorial data [Blasius and Greenacre, 2006]. By applying this method, we hoped to expose latent meaning-making structures and identify clusters of concepts and outliers. This subsequently allowed us to pinpoint cooccurring concepts and to examine how frames were constructed in relation to the dimensions identified. Next, by adding passive or secondary variables i.e., variables that did not construct the field, it was possible to locate their position within it relative to the concepts and frames identified. In this case, we incorporated both the individual newspaper titles and a variable identifying the newspapers as Dutch-language or French-language.

### 3. Newspaper frames

- 19 To investigate the relationships between concepts, we computed an MCA (see Appendix). The resulting map is presented in Figure 1. On this map, the dots represent primary or active variables that structure the field. These are the concepts present in news items that describe Brussels as a living environment. The triangles are passive variables that have no influence on the structure of the field – in this case, the newspapers titles. The proximity between concepts corresponds to shared substance: concepts that are close together often appear in the same article whilst those that are far apart are rarely mentioned concurrently. The MCA shows a clear two-dimensional structure that accounts for 65,7 % of the variance. The dimensions of the map reflect characteristic poles of topical orientation within newspapers coverage which can be interpreted as follows.

Figure 1. Multiple correspondence analysis of newspaper content pertaining to “Life in Brussels”



Note. DH=*La Dernière Heure*; DM=*De Morgen*; DS=*De Standaard*; HLN=*Het Laatste Nieuws*; HNB=*Het Nieuwsblad*; LA=*L'Avenir*; LLB=*La Libre Belgique*; LS=*Le Soir*

- 20 Accounting for 47,4 % of the variance, the first dimension separates concepts that emphasise the negative aspects of city life (on the left of the central axis) from the positive ones (on the right of the central axis). The most significant concepts on the negative side are terrorism, criminality, and negative perceptions of multiculturalism. These concepts often cooccur as their proximity on the map indicates. Negative references to policy affecting life in Brussels are also clearly located on this pole, representing the pessimistic view of the city as a chaotic and unsafe place to live. On the positive side of the axis, we find social life, citizen initiatives and multiculturalism; all of which contribute to the perception of the city as a lively metropolis with high cultural capital and social fabric.
- 21 This first dimension is consistent with what Verhoest *et al.* [2022] and te Braak *et al.* [2022] refer to as the tension between *cosmopolitan* and *phobian* mental representations or cultural schemata among the public. Those with perceptions driven by the cosmopolitan scheme are apt to view Brussels as a fertile ground for cultural exchange, liberality and tolerance. Conversely, those influenced by the phobian scheme are more likely to consider the city a risky and unsafe living environment shaped by their potential fear of crime, xenophobia and ethnocentricity. This correspondence suggests that there is a high level of positive and negative resonance between people's perceptions of life in Brussels and the way it is presented as a living environment in the press.
- 22 The second dimension accounts for 18,4 % of the variance and separates news items pertaining to policy, governance and politics (bottom of the map) from those that focus primarily on lived experiences of the city, in chronicling both favourable and unfavourable aspects of urban life (top of the map). Below the horizontal axis, we find references to both successful and unsuccessful policies related to quality of life,

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

	Mass	Quality	% inertia	Dimension 1			Dimension 2		
				Coordinates	Correlation <sup>2</sup>	Contribution	Coordinates	Correlation <sup>2</sup>	Contribution
<i>Active variables</i>									
<b>Poverty</b>									
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
<b>Criminality</b>									
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
<b>Policy [-]</b>									
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
<b>Terrorism</b>									
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
<b>Multicultural [-]</b>									
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
<b>Leisure</b>									
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
<b>Multicultural [+/-]</b>									
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
<b>Pleasant</b>									
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
<b>Social life</b>									
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
<b>Busy</b>									
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
<b>Multicultural [+]</b>									
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
<b>Policy [+]</b>									
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
<b>Language</b>									
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
<b>Citizen initiatives</b>									
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>									
<b>Newspaper title</b>									
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	
<b>Language group</b>									
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.
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## 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 (elitair versus populaire) dan op de taal waarin ze artikelen publiceren (Nederlands versus Frans).

## INDEX

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**Trefwoorden** Brusselsame samenleving, cultuur, kennis, talen, multiculturalisme, levenskwaliteit

**Mots-clés:** société bruxelloise, culture, connaissance, langues, multiculturalisme, qualité de vie

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## AUTHORS

### JOKE BAUWENS

Joke Bauwens (PhD) is professor of Media and Communication Studies at Vrije Universiteit Brussel and member of the research group ECHO. Her intellectual interests include the social, cultural and moral consequences of media. She has published on media production, representation and perception. Recent publication: TE BRAAK, P., VERHOEST, P., BAUWENS, J., MINNEN, J. and GLORIEUX, I., 2022. Perceptions as drivers of residential mobility: A resonance analysis. In: *Cities*, vol. 129, pp. 1–11.  
joke.bauwens[at]vub.be

**PASCAL VERHOEST**

Pascal Verhoest (PhD) is professor of Media and Communication Studies at Vrije Universiteit Brussel and member of the research group ECHO. His main research interest is in the relation between social and human perception, media use, social attitudes and sustainability. Recent publication: TE BRAAK, P., VERHOEST, P., BAUWENS, J., MINNEN, J. and GLORIEUX, I., 2022. Perceptions as drivers of residential mobility: A resonance analysis. In: *Cities*, vol. 129, pp. 1–11. pascal.verhoest[at]vub.be

**PETRUS TE BRAAK**

Petrus te Braak is a senior researcher at the research group Tempus Omnia Revelat (TOR), Sociology Department of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. His main research interests are in urban studies, time-use research and quantitative research methodology. Recent publication: TE BRAAK, P., VERHOEST, P., BAUWENS, J., MINNEN, J. and GLORIEUX, I., 2022. Perceptions as drivers of residential mobility: A resonance analysis. In: *Cities*, vol. 129, pp. 1–11. Doi: 10.1016/j.cities.2022.103819 ptebraak[at]vub.be