News narratives on Brussels city life A content and cognitive resonance analysis

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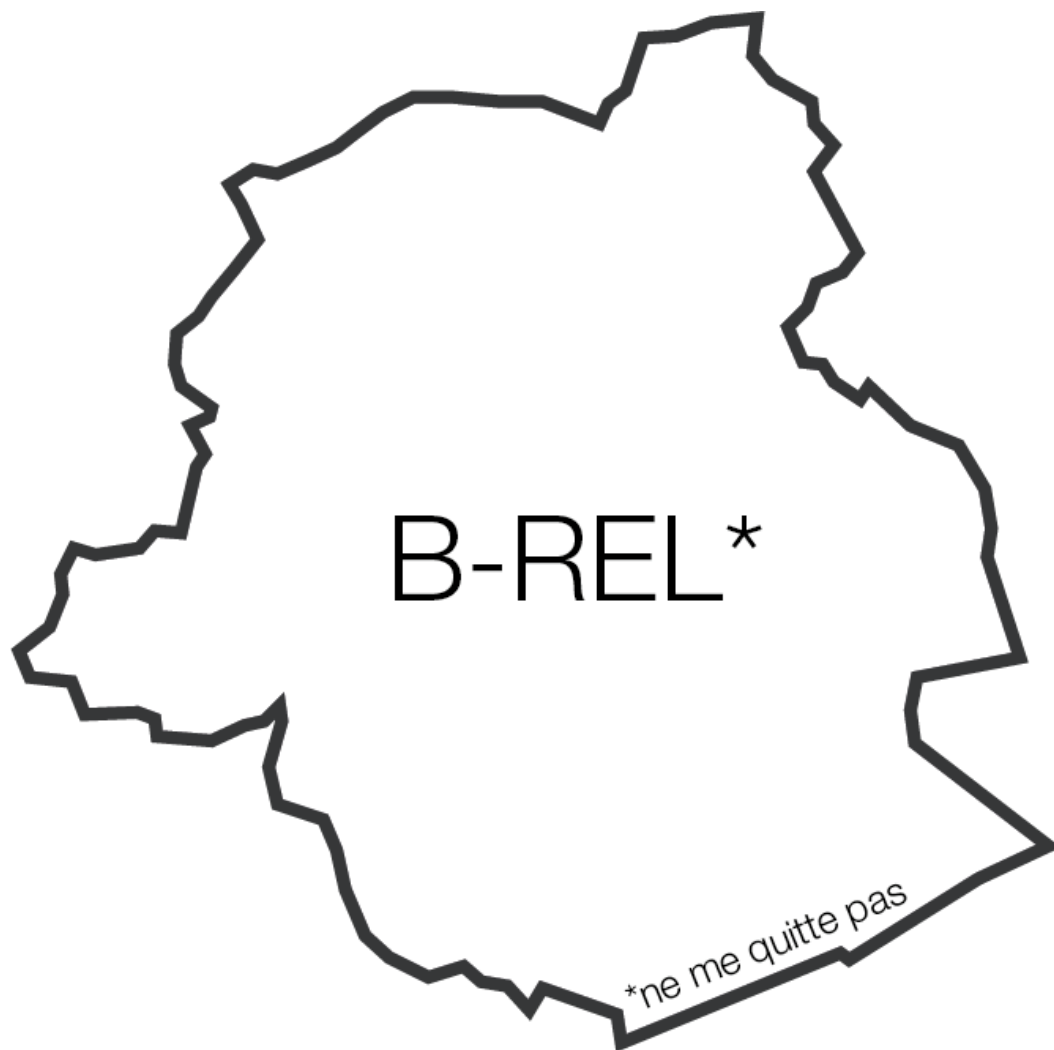
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A content and cognitive resonance analysis

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Culture, Emancipation, Media & Society

Funding

Acknowledgements

Abstract

Many cities around the world struggle with a negative image as a living environment. Brussels is such an example. This negative image of the city is believed to restrain people to move to Brussels, as well as to cause urban exile, particularly among middle class people who contribute to maintaining the social and economic resilience of the city. It is believed that the media play an important role in creating and maintaining this unfavourable image. What then, is the image media convey of the city? How does this image actually resonate in people's minds? This report addresses both issues by analysing 800 newspaper articles that contain information on Brussels as a living environment. This content analysis is based on codes that are drawn from an analysis of people's perceptions of Brussels as a living environment. This approach makes it possible to draw conclusions on how media narratives about Brussels as a living environment resonate with people's perceptions, possibly influencing their housing choices. It is concluded that the interaction of the public with the press is strongly polarised, contributing to an image that is either positive or, more frequently, negative. Physical and cultural proximity to the city, however, play an important mediating role, contributing to more nuanced and constructive images about Brussels, both in media narratives and public perceptions.

Keywords

image of Brussels, content analysis, newspapers, resonance, cluster analysis

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When it comes to place and city image, scholars from various fields (such as public relations, critical media studies, urban studies, journalism studies) assert that in defining, describing and characterizing territories, media are powerful suppliers of meaning and knowledge about places and cities. Media particularly affect people's understanding of cities when they do not have direct knowledge or experience of the city, such as non-residents and tourists compared. (e.g. Avraham, 2000; Dreier, 2005; Happer and Philo, 2013; McCann, 2004; Martin, 2000; Vale, 1995; Wiard and Perreira, 2019; Xue et al., 2012). A number of studies even find that the perceptions of residents are strongly shaped by media coverage about their city, neighbourhood, etc. (Boland, 2008; Kearns et al., 2013; Lindgren, 2009; Vale, 1995). Media can thus contribute to the maintenance of historically negative place imagery, despite positive changes in the objective characteristics of the city (Avraham, 2000, 2004; Boland, 2008).

Despite the importance granted to media as shapers of city images, empirical work about the representation of the Brussels Capital Region (Brussels for short) in the media is practically lacking. Wiard and Pereira (2019) found one notable exception. Through their work, they discovered that the poor municipalities (e.g. the city of Brussels, Schaerbeek, and Molenbeek) were more often problematized than the rich municipalities in the north-west and southeast of the Brussels Capital Region. Apart from this example, however, there has been a lack of systematic, empirically grounded research on media's role in the construction of public understanding of Brussels.

The image constructed by academics about Brussels is often based on personal, "impressionist" or anecdotal scrutiny of media imagery and newspaper headlines. This is remarkable for several reasons. First, the "sense of urgency" so often expressed with respect to Brussels urban planning. Second, the past and recent city marketing efforts to retain residents and build up their self-confidence. Third, the current "make-over strategies" to make neighbourhoods more "liveable".

To determine the image of a city is a difficult task, considering that various factors have an impact on how a city is perceived. Not only objective, material characteristics of a city shape its image (e.g. the size and characteristics of its location, population, infrastructure,

architecture, crime rate, employment rate, institutions located within the city, etc.), but also ideational and symbolic characteristics (e.g. culture, meaning, atmosphere, status, standing, political power, etc.) (Anholt, 2006; Avraham, 2000). In order to tackle this complexity, an original methodology was developed that differs from traditional content analysis in one key aspect. Instead of using predefined categories based on literature or derived from the press itself, a system of categories was constructed on the basis of the actual perceptions. A total of 180 respondents participated in this perception analysis, which included three different groups of people: outsiders, commuters, and residents.

With the perceptions of these three groups of people in mind, we then turned to the press narratives on Brussels in conducting a thematic content and cluster analysis of a large sample comprising 800 articles. Given Brussels' complicated cultural and political history in terms of language tensions and its bilingual status as the capital of Belgium, we decided to analyse the Dutch- and French-speaking press separately. Four Dutch-speaking and four French-speaking newspapers were selected for analysis. The choice of newspapers as a medium was made for practical reasons and because print media may be considered a representative agent in the process of city image-making. Others have also emphasised the importance of newspapers in city imagery (Bridge and Watson, 2000). Furthermore, it may be assumed that the findings stretch beyond newspaper content. This is so because media content is reverberant and news media are involved in appropriating ideas from other news media outlets (McKain, 2005).

An overview of the image of Brussels as theoretically articulated in scholarly work is presented in the first main section. In the absence of empirical studies on public knowledge of Brussels as a place to live—both in the media and in public opinion—narratives on the image of Brussels from different academic fields (such as history, literary studies, sociology, urban studies) are presented. The next main section is concerned with the methodology used for this study, i.e. a combination of perception and content analysis. The third main section presents the results of the content analysis. The paper concludes with a discussion on urban narratives and ideologies, and how these differences might resonate with public perception.

The image of Brussels: a culmination of (historical) paradoxes

It is often argued that to understand contemporary media portrayals of cities, historical awareness and a retrospective lens are required (Boland, 2008; Eichner and Mikos, 2017). Historical, literary and sociological work on Brussels also plays a serious role in co-constructing the "cultural knowledge" (Boland, 2008, p. 357) of the city. This body of work

often points at significant moments and developments in time that have contributed to Brussels' image.

Historically, the image of Brussels is often sculpted in relationship to the independence of Belgium in 1830, emphasizing its status as capital city of Belgium and seat of Belgian political, financial and legal power. More recently, the image of Brussels has also been associated with the laborious unification of Europe, starting from the interbellum (Acke and Beckers, 2016; De Groof and Elaut, 2010). As such, Brussels has been symbolized as a locus of geopolitics of pacification, especially after the Second World War when the European Union (in 1958) and the NATO (in 1966) headquarters were plopped down in the city.

These factors have contributed to the image of Brussels as "a European-scaled political global city" and "a diplomatic stronghold" (Vandenbroucke, 2016, p. 88), attracting highly educated cosmopolitan workers with English as their second language (Van Parijs, 2013, p. 281). In this regard, scholars also point to the image of Brussels as a place of asylum for political dissidents, critical thinkers and cultural outlaws (Acke and Beckers, 2016; Rea, 2013). The associations made with Brussels as a capital city, however, are not just positive (Rea, 2013; Corijn, 2013; Loeckx et al., 2014). In the international press, for example, the image of Brussels has become the "eponym for the EU usually announcing some unpleasant decision limiting the Member states' freedom of action" (Van Wynsberghe, 2013, p. 98).

Referring to Brussels internationalisation, academic literature on Brussels regularly points to citizen protest movements against the catastrophic outcomes of rampant property development, such as in the European quarter, and criticizes the gentrification of the centre of Brussels and other municipalities at the expense of vulnerable residents (Kesteloot, 2013). Overall, Brussels' urbanization is characterized by "geographical inequality and segregated fissures" (Vandenbroucke, 2016, p. 92). The poorer inhabitants live in the city centre and the municipalities directly surrounding it, following the Brussels canal from the south-west to the north-east of the region. Because of its shape this area is called "poor croissant" in policy circles and scholarly work on Brussels (Wiard & Pereira, 2019, p. 653). The richer inhabitants live in more distant municipalities to the northwest and southeast of this area.

Another related and deeply engrained historical image of Brussels is that of divisions by ethnicity as the result of colonization (started off by king Leopold II in 1881, continued by king Leopold III, and ended by king Baudouin in 1960) and migration (from the 1960s onwards). These divisions corroborate with the image of Brussels as a city that is characterized by class divisions and increasing social polarization between the rich and the poor, as well as between

international elites (expats, diplomats, business people, intellectuals) and low wage migrants (Baeten, 2001b; Corijn, 2013; Loeckx et al., 2014; Vandenbroucke, 2016)

These social divisions palpably show in high unemployment statistics (Corijn and Vloeberghs, 2013); incidentally, one of the many different factors that has an impact on a city's image (Avraham, 2004, p. 472). Approximately 25% of Brussels youth is unemployed and mostly born into migrant families; however, youth unemployment has been decreasing over the last five years. More recently, the terrorist attacks in Paris, Brussels Airport and Brussels, in which young Brussels men were involved, have furthered the image of Brussels as a "failed" and run-down city, not able to address the socio-economic and cultural challenges of a migrant metropolitan city and to build supportive social textures in all parts of the city (Rauchfleisch et al., 2017). The municipality of Molenbeek has been overused as an iconic example of the "failed city" or, as US President Donald Trump put it, a "hell hole".

Another factor that influences city's image is its physical appearance (Avraham, 2004, p. 472). The rampant impact of urbanization projects from the 1950s onwards, with the destruction of urban tissue as result (Romańczyk, 2012) has turned the image of Brussels as a historical and vivid place into a "non-place" of motorways, traffic jams and inanimate bureaucratic quartiers (Corijn and Vloeberghs, 2013). Some parts of the city have suffered severe urban decay such as the Northern Quarter (Schaarbeek), the Leopold Quarter, and the so-called canal zone (with the municipalities of Molenbeek and Anderlecht).

Finally, it is often stated that one of the major contemporary problems of Brussels is its relatively weak identity and lack of real image, so that it seems to escape to every definition (Corijn and Vloeberghs, 2013; Dillen, 2013; Laermans, 1999; Rea, 2013). From a cultural point of view, Brussels seems to lack a grand myth. It has no international aura as cultural city, and its image as artistic metropolis reverberates less than that of other cultural metropoles, such as New York, Berlin, Paris, London, etc. (Acke and Beckers, 2016; Cochez et al., 2013, p. 298). As Dillen (2013) puts it: "Brussels is caught in multiple paradoxes that have ended up in replacing its personality and identity" (p. 62).

Summarizing the academic literature, four narratives about Brussels may be recognised: 1) Brussels as capital; 2) Brussels as urbanistic failure; 3) Brussels as a place of social contradictions; and 4) related to the former, Brussels as a place of cultural and ethnical tensions. A fifth image, Brussels as a city without an image, may be added to this list. These academic accounts are, admittedly, based on research and elite sources but rarely or never include more systematic analysis of media and public imagery. There is a need to empirically address the

question of which role the media play in constructing public understanding of Brussels. The work presented here provides one of the first systematic investigations into this matter.

Methodology: Content analysis as resonance analysis

The methodology of content analysis used for this study complies mostly with the typical standards of content analysis but is distinct in one important aspect. The categories that were used for coding are based on an analysis of perceptions of Brussels as a place to live. The following sub-sections respectively describe the sampling technique used to select newspaper articles, the specificity of the procedure for coding these articles and the method of cluster analysis that was used to interpret the findings.

Sampling: Newspapers and articles examined

A stratified sampling procedure, often used in trend studies (Pleijter et al., 2006; Krippendorff, 2013), was applied to define the strata representative of the Belgian newspaper coverage of the last seven years. This stratification included language community, type of newspaper and year of publication. This sampling plan ensured that the textual units sampled were a fair representation of the diversity of newspapers in Belgium and sufficiently numerous for statistical analysis.

The stratification per language community was obtained by dividing the sample in two equal parts (i.e. 400 in Dutch and 400 in French). Within each language community, two leading elite newspapers were chosen (De Morgen, De Standaard, La Libre Belgique and Le Soir). In the popular segment, we chose a regionally oriented newspaper (Het Nieuwsblad and L'Avenir) and a popular newspaper (Het Laatste Nieuws and La Dernière Heure) for each language community. Given our interest in larger trends, we sampled newspapers published in four specific years (2011, 2013, 2015 and 2017) spread over seven years in total.

We deliberately did not select the year 2016, the year of the terrorist attacks in Brussels metro station Maelbeek and Brussels Airport. As we were interested in average news coverage on living in Brussels and its general trends, we assumed that the terrorist attacks would impinge on the news stories and distort the typical press coverage about daily life in Brussels. However, the Brussels lockdown (21 November to 25 November 2015) in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Paris (13 November 2015) had an impact on the news coverage about Brussels in the final weeks of 2015. In 2017, we also found press articles that dealt with the implications of the terrorist attacks on everyday life in Brussels.

The final stage of the sampling process was driven by the relevance criterion (see Krippendorff, 2013, p. 120). In each subgroup, defined by the two strata (8 newspapers; 4 periods), 25 journal articles were selected. GoPress Academic, an online media database, was used to identify articles on Brussels city life. Overall, from the pile of retrieved articles, only a small fraction explicitly referred to Brusselians or daily life in Brussels, either directly or indirectly. Given that Brussels is the political capital of Belgium and the EU, a significant number of articles made mention of Brussels without actually discussing aspects of its inhabitants' daily life experiences, environments, challenges and opportunities. Evidently, these articles were discarded.

Consistent with other research on newspaper coverage of city aspects (Kearns et al., 2013, p. 586), the sample articles needed to contain *direct* or *indirect* references to Brussels city life. An interview with an ex-football player of a Brussels based team, for example, would be considered relevant if part of the interview contained information on how the player experienced Burssels as a living environment. News coverage that reported about the refugee crisis (a topical subject in newspapers), crime and justice (long-lived popular subjects in papers) that dealt with Brussels as a city, were also selected.

Coding on the basis of perceptions

Most often, content analyses are performed by looking for words, themes or concepts that are derived from literature (e.g. theory and empirical research), or from a first inductive reading of the media material itself. Leading authors in content analysis acknowledge the risk of making inferences about media effects without taking into account how audience members might read or decode media in very different ways. However, apart from ethnographic content analysis, this criticism has rarely led to specific methods of coding starting explicitly from so-called "indigenous conceptions" instead of concepts imposed by theory and research (Krippendorff, 2013, pp. 27-28). Our study meets that criticism by asking the question: What can recipients read into the press that resonates with public conceptions about Brussels as a place to live?

To achieve this, we developed recording instructions that were based on a list of concepts drawn from a perception analysis about Brussels as a place to live among 180 so-called "Belgo-Belgians" (60 residents, 60 commuters and 60 people who neither live or work in Brussels,

from now on named as outsiders).[1] The results of this perception analysis are described in full in Verhoest et al. (2020). For an overview of the significant concepts coined in this analysis, see Table 3.

All press articles were subsequently coded via qualitative data analysis software. We drew upon the pre-set list of descriptive codes and their definitions. Following the general requirements of data analysis (systematic, comprehensive, rigorous) (Matthew and Ross, 2010; Krippendorff, 2013), the validity of coding and inter-coder reliability was assured via coder training and coder meetings. Parallel coding sessions, in which researchers conducted their own independent analyses of the texts, alternated with group meetings in order to assess the differences between interpretations of coding categories and whether they corresponded to the list of concepts found in the perception analysis. After extra review for doubtful cases, codes for which inter-coder agreement was difficult to reach were placed in the rest-group category. Codes from this rest-group were not included in the analysis.

If a sufficiently large numbers of related concepts could be identified within one of the predefined categories of the initial coding list, these categories were split into separate sub-concepts or into categories representing positive and negative sentiments. In this way, 11 new categories were created compared to the initial list of 33 concepts contained in the perception analysis. In total, 44 different concepts were identified and agreed upon (see Appendix). Furthermore, 20 articles of the original selection were invalidated as having no clear relation to Brussels as a living environment.

Cluster analysis

Since we analysed a relatively large sample of textual data through qualitative data analysis software, we decided to apply a two-step cluster analysis in order to: 1) provide meaningful structure to the numerous, multifaceted and subtle details of the press articles that emerged from the thematic interpretation; 2) formulate a more comprehensive understanding of the qualitative data set; 3) draw a bigger picture of the news narratives; and 4) visualize the larger pattern. Rather than starting with a priori conceptual categories drawn from theory and filling them with data, two-step cluster analysis allows to identify the natural groupings within the data set (Macia, 2015; Namey et al., 2008, p. 146). The clustering technique was the same as the one used in the perception analysis to regroup the concepts people associated with "living

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[1] This originally French term is used to designate Belgian people who do not consider themselves to come from immigrant families (e.g. Jacobs and Rea, 2007).

in Brussels". This renders the clusters of the perception analysis and the content analysis as comparable, as is shown in the third main section of this paper.

The combination of the researcher's in-depth familiarity with the text and its subtleties (cf. qualitative research) and a more distanced approach to the data (cf. quantitative approach) allows for a hybrid way of reporting the findings. Hence, the clustering reveals how textual meanings associated with these codes are mutually articulated in the articles (cf. Guest and McLellan, 2003). An important step to achieve this was to determine which variables would be considered to construct the cluster solution. Since we were interested in the co-occurrence of different themes about living in Brussels in one single article, we deleted all items that had only one code. Furthermore, in order to eliminate concepts that were only incidentally used, we removed all codes with a frequency below 10%. The French-speaking subsample consisted of 107 text units (see Table 1); for the Dutch-speaking subsample we ended up with 153 articles (see Table 2).

Main findings: saliency and typicality

In our analysis, the unit of observation is the theme, and the unit of analysis is the newspaper article. This means that all numbers, such as in the clusters, saliency, and frequency counts, are references to the number of unique press articles. The number of times a concept appears indicates the saliency and typicality of particular themes in press narratives on Brussels. In the following paragraphs, these figures are first analysed in terms of the differences according to the stratification of the press (French-speaking/Dutch-speaking, elite/popular) and then in terms of the narratives that they produced.

Differences per language and per audience

For this content analysis we only focused on newspaper articles that discussed at least two themes related to living in Brussels. The correlation between newspaper titles and number of codes attributed to press articles was significant and demonstrated that all four elite newspapers contain more articles that have three or more codes than popular papers. The observed correlations between type of newspaper and number of themes narrated in the press was considered as an indication that elite newspapers reported on life in Brussels in a more elaborate and extended way than popular newspapers. The analysis also showed that elite press themes differed significantly from popular press themes. In popular press articles life in Brussels was more often narrated in relation to crime news. Elite newspapers paid more attention to politics and societal challenges in terms of division, the city's ecosystem and the

cost of living in the city. Elite papers were also openly aware that Brussels was often negatively portrayed in the media.

Table 1. Main themes addressed by newspapers in which Brussels city life is covered (Dutch-speaking vs. French-speaking press) (2011-2017, n=780).

	Sig.	Dutch-speaking press (*n*=399)		French-speaking press (*n*=381)		Total (*n*=780)	
		f	%	f	%	f	%
Policy negative	n.s.	82	20,6	72	18,9	154	19,7
Crime	n.s.	85	21,3	61	16	146	18,7
Poverty/misery	**	86	21,6	54	14,2	140	17,9
Terrorism	n.s.	51	12,8	42	11	93	11,9
Multicultural negative	**	56	14	31	35,6	87	11,2
Multicultural neutral	*	49	12,3	29	7,6	78	10,0
Pleasant environment	n.s.	39	9,8	38	4,9	77	9,9
Leisure/happenings	n.s.	46	11,5	30	7,9	76	9,7
Policy positive	**	27	6,8	48	12,6	75	9,6
Social life positive	n.s.	35	8,8	36	9,4	71	9,1
Social life	n.s.	22	5,5	32	8,4	54	6,9
Multicultural positive	n.s.	33	8,3	19	5	52	6,7
Expensive	n.s.	27	6,8	21	5,5	48	6,2
Language	n.s.	27	6,8	19	5	46	5,9
Liveliness	n.s.	20	5	26	6,8	46	5,9
Busy/chaotic/crowded	***	33	8,3	7	1,8	40	5,1
Traffic	n.s.	19	4,8	17	4,5	36	4,6
Dirty	n.s.	22	5,5	12	3,1	34	4,4
Police	n.s.	22	5,5	10	2,6	32	4,1
Green character positive	n.s.	17	4,3	14	3,7	31	4,0
Media coverage negative	n.s.	19	4,8	10	2,6	29	3,7
City renovation	n.s.	15	3,8	13	3,4	28	3,6
Social life negative	n.s.	19	4,8	9	2,4	28	3,6
Diversity	**	22	5,5	4	1	26	3,3
Public transport positive	*	8	2	18	4,7	26	3,3
Social inequality	**	21	5,3	4	1	25	3,2
Unsafety	n.s.	15	2,8	10	2	25	3,2
Noise	*	7	1,8	17	4,5	24	3,1
Housing quality neg.	*	15	3,8	4	1	19	2,4
Pollution	n.s.	13	3,3	6	1,6	19	2,4
Proximity	*	14	3,5	5	1,3	19	2,4
Architecture positive	n.s.	11	2,8	5	1,3	16	2,1
Capital of Europe	***	1	0,3	15	3,9	16	2,1
Public transport neg.	n.s.	7	1,8	8	2,1	15	1,9
Affordable housing positive	n.s.	6	1,5	8	2,1	14	1,8
Calm	n.s.	9	2,3	4	1	13	1,7
Green character negative	n.s.	9	2,3	3	0,8	12	1,5
Architecture negative	*	9	2,3	2	0,5	11	1,4
Cosmopolitan	*	2	0,5	8	2,1	10	1,3
Schools positive	n.s.	7	1,8	3	0,8	10	1,3
Schools negative	n.s.	5	1,3	4	1	9	1,2
Student city	n.s.	6	1,5	2	0,5	8	1,0
Family life	n.s.	3	0,8	3	0,8	6	0,8
Lack of space	n.s.	0	0	2	0,5	2	0,3

*p<=.05; **p<=.01; ***p<=.001; n.s.= non significant

f = frequencies; multiple topics could be ascribed to a single text, for this reason the total number of cases exceeds the total number of units of analysis.

Table 2 also shows some remarkable differences between the French- and Dutch-speaking press. Overall, the Dutch-speaking press is more negative. The Dutch-speaking press more frequently associates living conditions in Brussels with poverty, misery and social inequity. The busy, crowded and chaotic character of the city generates also more attention in the Flemish newspapers, next to the alleged poor housing quality and unattractive architecture. Finally, the theme of diversity is significantly more often connected to Brussels city life, both in positive and negative terms.

The French-speaking press, in contrast, relates living in Brussels more often to the positive aspects of Brussels. A characteristic of Brussels that is significantly more often stressed in the French-speaking press is the cosmopolitan lifestyle in the city. The quality of public transport is more appreciated. The French-speaking press is also more positive about local policy initiatives, as well as the status of Brussels as the capital of Europe. The only negative aspect of living in Brussels that French-speaking newspapers mentions more often is the noisy environment.

Table 2. Composition of Dutch-speaking press narratives across clusters (n=153).

Codes	Sig.	Cluster 1 (*n*=43)	Cluster 2 (*n*=50)	Cluster 3 (*n*=60)
Total		28,1	32,7	39,2
Poverty/misery	***	8,1	46,8	45,2
Crime	***	6,9	17,2	75,9
Policy negative	**	14,0	42,1	43,9
Terrorism	***	15,6	9,4	75,0
Multicultural negative	***	4,4	4,4	91,1
Leisure/happenings	***	88,2	2,9	8,8
Multicultural neutral	***	10,7	75,0	14,3
Pleasant environment	***	81,5	0,0	18,5
Social life positive	**	53,1	25,0	21,9
Busy/chaotic/crowded	n.s.	42,9	33,3	23,8
Multicultural positive	***	70,8	8,3	20,8
Policy positive	***	11,8	88,2	0,0
Language	***	10,5	89,5	0,0

*p<=.05; **p<=.01; ***p<=.001; n.s.= non significant
Note: the numbers indicate row percentages (i.e. percentages that horizontally sum to 100%); the shaded cells point to highest saliency across the two clusters.

Fit statistics
1-Cluster: BIC= 2103,496
2-Cluster: BIC=1939,459; Ratio of BIC Changes=1; Ratio of Distance Measures=1,291
3-Cluster: BIC=1827,154; Ratio of BIC Changes=,685; Ratio of Distance Measures=1,919
4-Cluster: BIC=1799,936; Ratio of BIC Changes=,166; Ratio of Distance Measures=1,067
5-Cluster: BIC=1778,508; Ratio of BIC Changes=,131; Ratio of Distance Measures=1,057
6-Cluster: BIC=1761,773; Ratio of BIC Changes=,102; Ratio of Distance Measures=1,165
7-Cluster: BIC=1756,693; Ratio of BIC Changes=,031; Ratio of Distance Measures=1,052
8-Cluster: BIC=1755,127; Ratio of BIC Changes=,010; Ratio of Distance Measures=1,075
9-Cluster: BIC=1758,234; Ratio of BIC Changes=-,019; Ratio of Distance Measures=1,039

Press narratives

As explained earlier in the article, the two-step clustering in the study made it possible to uncover relationships between the distinct themes found in the press articles. Hence, the clusters presented below were an indication of the larger narratives that Belgian newspapers articulate on life in Brussels. These narratives consisted of robust ensembles of ideas or concepts that contribute to particular portrayals of life in Brussels. Given the different affinity of the Dutch- and French-speaking communities with Brussels, two separate cluster analyses were performed, one for the Dutch-speaking and one for the French-speaking press.

As Table 3 shows, we found three clusters for the Dutch-speaking press. The first two clusters are approximately of similar size. Cluster 1 points at a press narrative that interweaves the cultural and social benefits of living in the city. Enjoying the good life in terms of leisure, pubs, restaurants, arts and cultural happenings (cf. leisure/happenings), social life (cf. social life positive) and the general environment and atmosphere in Brussels (cf. pleasant environment) is the leading theme in this narrative. The theme of multiculturalism is clearly and predominantly linked to this narrative in positive terms.

Cluster 2 contains newspaper articles that portray life in Brussels in terms of metropolitan city life and its policy challenges. Brussels' heterogeneity in particular is a leading theme, focussing on how to cope with this problem This focus shows a considerable interest in division in socio-economic terms (cf. poverty, misery) and diversity in cultural terms (cf. multicultural neutral, language). Policy issues related to these topics are discussed both in constructive and critical terms (cf. policy positive, policy negative).

Cluster 3 is the most negative news narrative, especially compared to Cluster 2. It epitomizes the gloomy press narrative about Brussels as an unsafe, unstable and uncertain place to live (cf. crime). The nexus of precarity (poverty/misery), risk, (cf. terrorism) and ethnocentrism (cf. multiculturalism, negative) is very prominent in the articles from this cluster. The news narrative in this cluster also shows a distinctively negative perspective on policy. From this interpretation of the clustering, we can infer that Dutch-speaking newspapers articulate three narratives on life in Brussels (see Figure 1): 1) a narrative of *the city as a locus of unsafety, risk and danger* (39%); 2) a narrative on *Brussels' heterogeneity and how to govern it* (33%); and 3) a narrative on Brussels as *a locus of urban hedonism* (28%).
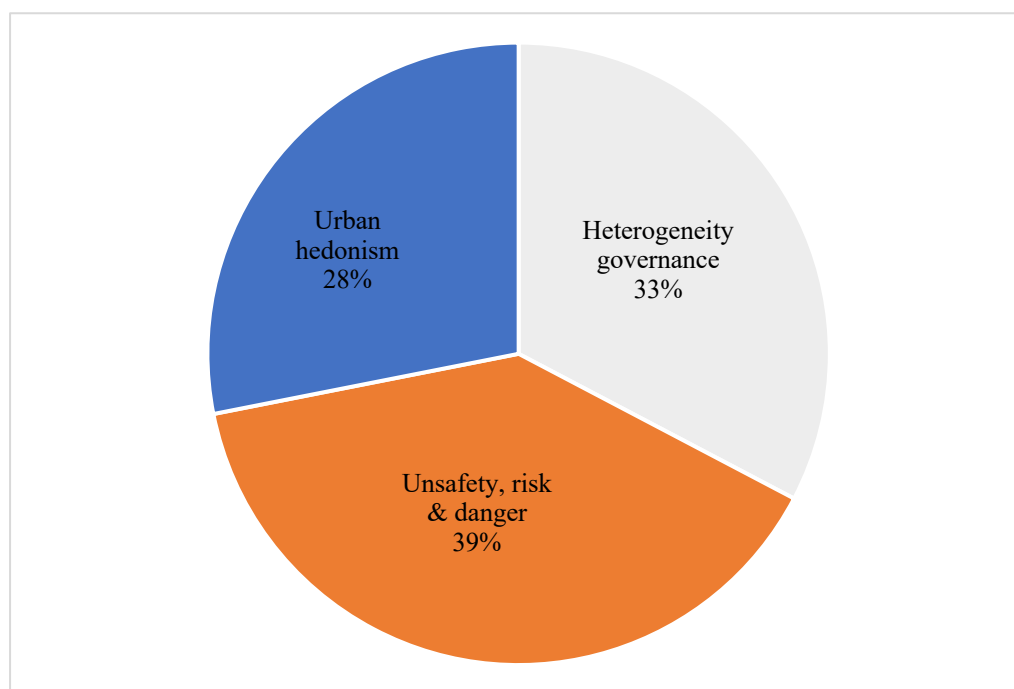
Figure 1. Dutch-speaking press narratives on living in Brussels

As shown in Table 3, the two-step cluster analysis of the French-speaking press articles produces a different result. First, some concepts that determine the Dutch-speaking news narratives do not play a role anymore (cf. busy, chaotic, crowded; multicultural positive, language), and a new theme comes to the foreground; namely, citizen initiatives. For the French-speaking press the coded data break up into five clusters. From the saliency and typicality analysis we have already learned that the French-speaking press portrays a more diversified image of living in Brussels with a less pronounced concentration around particular themes. In the cluster analysis we see this also materialized in a higher number of clusters, indicating a more varied pattern of press narratives.

Three out of five clusters point towards the same narratives also found in the Dutch-speaking press. Cluster 4 in the French-speaking press corresponds to the first cluster in the Flemish press. Articles highlight the leisure opportunities in Brussels; its vibrant bar and restaurant scene, cultural life, historic charm, and enjoyable atmosphere (cf. leisure/happenings; pleasant environment). Living in Brussels is presented in this news narrative as urban hedonism. Cluster 5 is the French-speaking equivalent of the third cluster in the Dutch-speaking subsample. Here the themes of crime, multicultural negative and terrorism shape a news narrative that paints Brussels in terms of unsafety, danger and risk (cf. crime, multiculturalism negative, terrorism). Cluster 1 shows several similarities with the second cluster of the Dutch-speaking press. This press narrative pay substantial attention to the theme

of multiculturalism, crime and poverty but its treatment of the subject is not overtly negative (cf. multicultural neutral). These articles take a political approach to living in Brussels (cf. policy negative; policy positive). The governance of the city is thus the leading theme.

Table 3: Composition of French-speaking press narratives across clusters (n=107)

Codes	Sig.	Cluster 1 (*n*=21)	Cluster 2 (*n*=24)	Cluster 3 (*n*=16)	Cluster 4 (*n*=19)	Cluster 5 (*n*=27)
Total		19,6	22,4	15,0	17,8	25,2
Poverty/misery	***	21,2	15,2	42,4	9,1	12,1
Crime	***	22,7	0,0	4,5	0,0	72,7
Policy negative	***	57,1	11,4	2,9	2,9	25,7
Terrorism	***	5,3	15,8	0,0	10,5	68,4
Multicultural negative	***	0,0	0,0	0,0	7,1	92,9
Leisure/happenings	***	0,0	0,0	0,0	100	0,0
Multicultural neutral	***	31,6	0,0	42,1	21,1	5,3
Pleasant environment	***	5,9	47,1	0,0	47,1	0,0
Social life positive	***	0,0	51,6	29,0	12,9	6,5
Policy positive	**	30,8	7,7	30,8	15,4	15,4
Citizen initiatives	***	0,0	76,0	16,0	4,0	4,0

**p<=.01; ***p<=.001
Note: the numbers indicate row percentages (i.e. percentages that horizontally sum to 100%); the shaded cells point to highest saliency across the five clusters.

Fit statistics
1-Cluster: BIC=1305,250
2-Cluster: BIC=1161,145; Ratio of BIC Changes=1; Ratio of Distance Measures=1,621
3-Cluster: BIC=1091,934; Ratio of BIC Changes=,480; Ratio of Distance Measures=1,147
4-Cluster: BIC=1038,189; Ratio of BIC Changes=,373; Ratio of Distance Measures=1,444
5-Cluster: BIC=1016,785; Ratio of BIC Changes=,149; Ratio of Distance Measures=1,474
6-Cluster: BIC=1018,777; Ratio of BIC Changes=-,014; Ratio of Distance Measures=1,036

The two remaining clusters in the French-speaking press differ from the ones found in the Dutch-speaking newspapers in the sense that they discuss life in Brussels in terms of community and togetherness. Cluster 2 conveys a news narrative that stresses the social fabric and feel of everyday life in Brussels (cf. social life positive, citizen initiatives). It includes associations with Brussels as a pleasant environment with a nice atmosphere, a warm social character and engaged citizens. Brussels emerges from this narrative as a social community (cf. pleasant environment). Cluster 3 shows a news narrative that is concerned about the challenges Brussels is facing in terms of socio-economic division (cf. poverty/misery) and cultural diversity (cf. multicultural neutral) but remains confident about the capacity to resolve these issues (cf. policy positive). In this, it is very different from any of the clusters found in the Dutch newspapers.
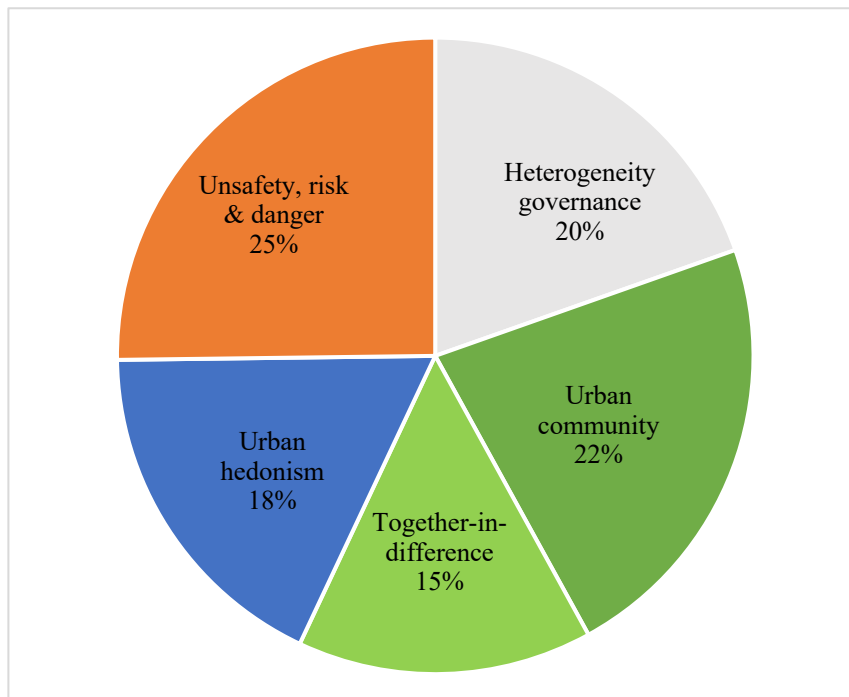
Figure 2. French-speaking press narratives on living in Brussels.

According to the two-step clustering, we can infer that French-speaking newspapers convey five narratives of life in Brussels (see Figure 2): 1) a narrative of the city as a *locus of unsafety, risk and danger* (25%); 2) a narrative on *Brussels' heterogeneity and how to govern it* (20%); 3) a narrative on Brussels a *locus of urban hedonism* (18%); 4) a narrative on *Brussels as an urban community* (22%); and 5) a narrative on Brussels as *togetherness-in-difference* (15%).

Polarization and perception

Two main findings strike the eye when reviewing the cluster analysis. Firstly, there is a polarisation of the image of Brussels. Secondly, there is a marked difference between the French-speaking and Dutch-speaking press. The Dutch-speaking press appears to be much more polarised than its French-speaking counterpart. Both these issues are explained in this section. Alongside, the resonance of the press with public perceptions is discussed.

The *city as a locus of unsafety, danger and risk* cluster contains the most negative narrative about Brussels. By focusing on themes of crime, terrorism, and poverty and by discussing multiculturalism in terms of disadvantage and risk, these news narratives on Brussels may be said to contribute to "anti-urban ideology" (Hummon, 1985, p. 2) in order to construct an image of Brussels as an "untamed" city (Baeten, 2001a, p. 55) that needs to be purified and controlled.

The main counter-narrative, Brussels as a *locus of urban hedonism*, is the narrative of Brussels as a source of pleasure. This narrative goes against the classic "clichés of urban doom" (Glass, 1989) but does not really add to a conception of Brussels as a community of citizens, neighbours and urbanites who show commitment to their dwelling places. Rather, it reduces Brussels to a place of enjoyment and distraction. In that way, Dutch-speaking newspapers in particular paint Brussels as a place that is "at once alluring and threatening" (Bridge and Watson, 2000, p. 9).

Both the positive and negative press narratives can be found in people's perceptions. The findings of the perception analysis are summarised in Table 4. This figure shows that the perceptions of commuters and people living as well as working outside Brussels and fall into two broad categories, which consist of the same concepts that are found in the positive and negative clusters of the content analysis.

In comparison with these positive and negative perceptions, the narrative on Brussels' *heterogeneity and how to govern it*, which can be found in both the French- and Dutch-speaking press, offers a more nuanced account. These news stories "problematize the city's growing heterogeneity and the tensions and conflicts that come with it" (Baeten, 2001a, p. 55) but also pay attention to governance, both in terms of threats and opportunities.

In addition to this narrative, the French-speaking press pays considerably more attention to the social fabric of city life. This transpires both in the narrative on Brussels as *an urban community* and on *togetherness-in-difference*, two clusters that are significant in the French-speaking press but totally absent in the Dutch-speaking. That is not to say that concepts relating to these narratives cannot be found in the Flemish newspapers, but their presence is too weak to constitute separate clusters.

There are several reasons to explain why the French-speaking press is more diverse and positive in its portrayal of Brussels. First and foremost, the French-speaking newspapers have a significantly larger and more diversified audience in Brussels than the Dutch-speaking press. A second element is the francophone character of the majority of informal and formal community initiatives and organisations in Brussels. A third reason is that while the French-speaking newspapers are still all housed in Brussels, in recent history most Flemish press has relocated outside Brussels. From that perspective, it is interesting to supplement the analyses

in the future, following the relocation of De Standaard from the periphery (Groot-Bijgaarden) to the Shell building in the centre of Brussels.[2]

The Dutch-speaking community has much weaker bonds with Brussels than the French speakers, who consider Brussels and Wallonia to be one cultural 'federation', the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles.[3] It is consequently understandable that the French-speaking press shows more affinity with the city's everyday life and resilience of Brussels. As argued by Gutsche (2014), journalists are "at the center of place-making" (p. 58), and their familiarity with and perspective on the city as local insiders likely adds to a more nuanced place imagery (Avraham, 2000).

The more positive and diverse account given by the press, however, only weakly resonates with the public. This is illustrated in Tables 4, 5 and 6. These tables contain the main the concepts that differentiated the perceptions of Brussels residents and show a polarisation of positive and negative perceptions of Brussels that closely related to the *city as a locus of unsafety, risk and danger* and Brussels as *locus of urban hedonism* clusters in the press. Overall, there seems to be a deeply entrenched negative and simplified place imagery about Brussels in the press, which Boland (2008) notes, "tends to stick" and is "difficult to overcome" (p. 356).

A remarkable difference, however, is that the Brussels' resident clusters contains a positive appreciation of social life in Brussels and a critique on policy. These two concepts are totally absent in the perception of commuters and outsiders. The perceptions of Brussels inhabitants thus resonances much better with French-speaking press than with the Dutch-speaking press. This may be attributed to the factors already identified. The French-speaking press is physically and culturally more in touch with Brussels, and it may have greater incentives to serve its public than the Dutch-speaking press.

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[2] De Standaard vestigt zich in centrum Brussel, *Bruzz*, 26 March 2019, https://www.bruzz.be/samenleving/de-standaard-vestigt-zich-centrum-brussel-2019-03-26.

[3] http://www.federation-wallonie-bruxelles.be/

Table 4. *Perception of Non-Residents*

	Sig.	Negative cluster (*n*=28)	Positive cluster (*n*=32)	Total (*n*=60)
Total		46,7	53,3	100
Busy, chaotic, crowded	***	100,0	0,0	46,7
Multicultural negative	n.s.	32,1	43,8	38,3
Traffic congestion	n.s.	39,3	25,0	31,7
Proximity	†	42,9	21,9	31,7
Pleasant, beautiful, historic	n.s.	21,4	34,4	28,3
Crime & safety	n.s.	21,4	34,4	28,3
Leisure, pubs & restaurants, arts & culture	†	7,1	25,0	16,7
Multicultural neutral	*	25,0	6,3	15,0
Lively, animations	*	3,6	21,9	13,3
Lack of green	†	21,4	6,3	13,3
Public transport & mobility	n.s.	17,9	6,3	11,7
Dirty	n.s.	7,1	12,5	10,0

† p<.1 ;*p<=.05; ***p<=.001; n.s.= non significant

Note: the numbers indicate column percentages (i.e. the percentage within the cluster that mentioned the specific code); the shaded cells point to highest saliency across the two clusters.

Fit statistics
1-Cluster: BIC=786,093
2-Cluster: BIC=740,516; Ratio of BIC change=1; Ratio of Distance Measures=1,485
3-Cluster: BIC=725,886; Ratio of BIC change=0,321; Ratio of Distance Measures=1,215
4-Cluster: BIC=722,545; Ratio of BIC change=0,073; Ratio of Distance Measures=1,054
5-Cluster: BIC=721,890; Ratio of BIC change=0,014; Ratio of Distance Measures=1,442
6-Cluster: BIC=736,494; Ratio of BIC change=-0,320; Ratio of Distance Measures=1,022

Table 5. *Perception of Residents*

	Sig.	Negative Cluster 1 (*n*=21)	Negative Cluster 2 (*n*=19)	Positive Cluster 3 (*n*=20)	Total (*n*=60)
Total		35,0	31,7	33,3	100
Lively, animations	***	9,5	10,5	70,0	30,0
Noisy	n.s.	14,3	36,8	20,0	23,3
Busy, chaotic, crowded	***	52,4	0,0	5,0	20,0
Proximity	*	23,8	0,0	35,0	20,0
Public transport & mobility	***	0,0	15,8	45,0	20,0
Traffic congestion	***	4,8	42,1	0,0	15,0
Pleasant, beautiful, historic	n.s.	19,0	0,0	25,0	15,0
Policy negative	***	4,8	42,1	0,0	15,0
Leisure, pubs & restaurants, arts & culture	n.s.	4,8	21,1	15,0	13,3
Social life	***	0,0	0,0	40,0	13,3
Multicultural negative	†	23,8	10,5	0,0	11,7
Crime & safety	*	23,8	0,0	5,0	10,0
Lack of green	*	0,0	26,3	5,0	10,0

† p<.1 ;*p<=.05; ***p<=.001; n.s.= non significant

Note: the numbers indicate column percentages (i.e. the percentage within the cluster that mentioned the specific code); the shaded cells point to highest saliency across the three clusters.

Fit statistics
1-Cluster: BIC=739,533
2-Cluster: BIC=705,292; Ratio of BIC change=1; Ratio of Distance Measures=1,197
3-Cluster: BIC=685,465; Ratio of BIC change=0,579; Ratio of Distance Measures=1,577
4-Cluster: BIC=692,364; Ratio of BIC change=-0,201; Ratio of Distance Measures=1,164

Table 6. *Perception of Commuters*

	Sig.	Negative cluster (*n=40*)	Positive cluster (*n=20*)	Total (*n=60*)
Total		66,7	33,3	100
Busy, chaotic, crowded	*	67,5	35,0	56,7
Traffic congestion	n.s.	25,0	25,0	25,0
Proximity	***	0,0	60,0	20,0
Lack of space	†	22,5	5,0	16,7
Lively animations	***	0,0	45,0	15,0
Multicultural negative	n.s.	12,5	20,0	15,0
Pollution	n.s.	15,0	15,0	15,0
Multicultural positive	†	7,5	25,0	13,3
Noisy	n.s.	10,0	10,0	10,0
Public transport & mobility	n.s.	10,0	10,0	10,0
Pleasant, beautiful, historic	**	2,5	25,0	10,0
Leisure, pubs & restaurants, arts & culture	***	0,0	30,0	10,0

† p<.1 ;*p<=.05;**p<.01; ***p<=.001; n.s.= non significant

Note: the numbers indicate column percentages (i.e. the percentage within the cluster that mentioned the specific code); the shaded cells point to highest saliency across the two clusters.

Fit statistics
1-Cluster: BIC=668,172
2-Cluster: BIC=629,570; Ratio of BIC change=1; Ratio of Distance Measures=1,514
3-Cluster: BIC=620,760; Ratio of BIC change=0,228; Ratio of Distance Measures=1,304
4-Cluster: BIC=625,450; Ratio of BIC change=-0,121; Ratio of Distance Measures=1,173

Conclusion

The study proposed in this report analysed the content of 400 French-speaking and 400 Dutch-speaking newspaper articles. This content analysis was performed using a coding system comprising concepts that were drawn from a perception analysis of 180 Belgo-Belgians. This population largely corresponded to the public of the newspaper analysed. With this, one of the major limitations of this study was touched upon, namely that there were many other communities in Brussels. Some minorities, such as the Dutch-speaking Brusselians and Eurocrats have their own, specifically Brussels-based, media. These were not analysed in this study.

In terms of the different kind of newspapers analysed, two conclusions may be drawn. Compared to popular newspapers, elite press tends to pay more attention to the social, political and economic aspects of living Brussels, which is from a general point of view not surprising. Elite newspapers are also more self-reflexive in that they are aware of the role they play in constructing a negative image about Brussels. The major difference, however, is between the French- and Dutch-speaking newspapers. This is reflected in the different narratives that they convey.

Applying a cluster analysis to the different concepts the press uses to report on Brussels as a place to live, five different narratives were identified. Three of those were conveyed by

both the French and Dutch speaking communities: 1) a narrative of the city as a *locus of unsafety, risk and danger*; 2) a narrative on Brussels a *locus of urban hedonism*; and3) a narrative on Brussels' *heterogeneity and how to govern it.* There were two of these narratives that were only found in the French-speaking press: 1) a narrative on *Brussels as an urban community*; and 2) a narrative on Brussels as *togetherness-in-difference*.

The two first narratives, Brussels as a *locus of unsafety, risk and danger* and Brussels as a *locus of urban hedonism*, most strongly resonate with popular perception. As these concepts are strongly antonymous and convey opposing sentiments about Brussels, it may be concluded on theoretical grounds that the interaction between the Belgo-Belgian press and its audiences contribute to a polarisation of views about Brussels as a place to live.

The three other narratives only weakly resonate with the public perception. These narratives include: 1) Brussels' *heterogeneity and how to govern it*; 2) Brussels *as an urban community*; and 3) Brussels as *togetherness-in-difference*. Elements of these narratives can be found in the perceptions of Brussels' residents but hardly, if at all, in the perceptions of commuters and non-Brussels' residents. In other words, the resonance of these narratives is only found among people under conditions of physical and cultural proximity. The issue of cultural and physical proximity also explains why the narrative on Brussels *as an urban community* and on *togetherness-in-difference* are only significant in the French-speaking press.

The comparison of narratives and perceptions indicates that the positive and negative narratives of the press largely coincide with the positive and negative perceptions of the public. It might thus be concluded that the press, in particular the Dutch-speaking, reinforces the polarisation of opinions that already exist in the public. However, the reverse mechanism may also hold true. Since the media are generally sensitive to their audiences, they may be tempted to produce these positive and negative narratives, knowing that they will resonate with their public. In any event, one main cognitive effect is likely to be the consolidation or even the reinforcement of the existing polarisation.

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Appendix. Concepts associated with 'living in Brussels' as found in the press

Concepts	Description
Affordable housing	Brussels as a place where one can find an affordable place to live
Architecture negative	The non-aesthetic and unattractive characteristics of Brussels architecture
Architecture positive	The aesthetic and practical characteristics of Brussels architecture
Busy/chaotic/crowded	The hectic and chaotic character of Brussels; population density; overcrowding
Calm	Brussels as a calm place with quiet and peaceful spots
Capital of Europe	Brussels as capital of Europe
Social participation	Bottom-up initiatives, actions and campaigns started by Brussels inhabitants; civic actions both against and in favour of policy measures
City renovation	Initiatives, programs of renovation and refurbishment (e.g. streets, boroughs, buildings, houses) in Brussels
Cosmopolitan	Cosmopolitan lifestyle in explicit terms
Crime	Crime, criminal activities and criminal offences taking place in Brussels; criminals in and from Brussels; vandalism; aggression; violence; drug use
Dirty	Brussels as a dirty place; waste and trash in Brussels streets
Diversity	The diversity of the Brussels population in terms of age, religion, LGTBQ+ and class; in positive terms
Expensive	The high cost-of-living in Brussels; unaffordable housing (high rents, housing prices)
Family life	The quality of living in Brussels for families with children
Green character negative	The absence of green areas in Brussels
Green character positive	The presence of green areas in Brussels (parks, gardens, flora, planters)
Housing quality negative	The old, uncomfortable, cramped and unsafe residences in Brussels
Lack of space	The lack of living space in Brussels
Language	Language diversity and language-related problems in Brussels; bilingual character (French/Dutch) of the city
Liveliness	The lively character of Brussels in negative terms (e.g. nuisance of night life); in positive terms (e.g. the pulse of the city, its vibrant character); in neutral, descriptive terms
Media coverage negative	The negative representation of Brussels in the media
Multicultural negative	Multicultural life in Brussels in negative terms (e.g. crime, terrorism, social isolation, discrimination, racism, language deficits, deprivation)
Noise	Noise pollution in Brussels due to airplanes, cars
Pleasant environment	Brussels as a pleasant dwelling environment; with a pleasant atmosphere; historical urban character; beautiful corners, boroughs, views
Police	The presence of police in Brussels; Brussels police functioning in negative terms (e.g. police brutality)
Policy negative	Policy measures that have impact on living in Brussels; discussed in critical terms
Policy positive	Policy measures that have an impact on living in Brussels; discussed in positive terms
Pollution	Bad air quality and air pollution in Brussels
Poverty/misery	Poor and miserable living circumstances in Brussels (e.g. impoverished inhabitants; low-income people; vacancy; squats; unemployment; decay; deprivation; homelessness)
Proximity	Brussels as a city of many amenities
Public transport negative	Brussels public transport; discussed in negative terms
Public transport positive	Brussels public transport; discussed in positive terms
Schools negative	Functioning of Brussels schools; discussed in negative terms
Schools positive	Functioning of Brussels schools; discussed in negative terms
Social inequality	The gap between the rich and poor in Brussels
Social life negative	The lack of social contact among Brussels inhabitants; disintegration of the social fabric; social atomization; living side by side
Social life positive	Social cohesion and respect among Brussels people; Brussels as a warm and open place; righteousness, helpfulness and solidarity; friendship; social contact

Student city	Brussels as a place of student life
Terrorism	Terror and terrorists in and from Brussels; fear of terror; military presence in Brussels; terrorist threat
Traffic	Congestion; traffic jams; lack of parking spaces in Brussels
Unsafety	Insecurity; feelings of unsafety related to everyday life in Brussels