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All Aboard Belfast's 'Brandwagon': From 'Pariah City' to 'Energised City'

Boland, P., & McKay, S. (2021). All Aboard Belfast's 'Brandwagon': From 'Pariah City' to 'Energised City'. *Town Planning Review*, 92(6), 723-754. <https://doi.org/10.3828/tpr.2021.10>

Published in:
Town Planning Review

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

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All Aboard Belfast's 'Brandwagon': From 'Pariah City' to 'Energised City'

“Branding has invaded all aspects of public and private life... Territorial entities such as cities, regions and countries are now also being branded like companies and products... It seems the time is rapidly approaching when territorial entities can no longer afford not to jump on the ‘brandwagon’ - it’s branding or bust” (van Ham, 2002: 250, 252).

Introduction

The above epigraph captures the ineluctable omnipresence and omnipotence of branding. We live in a world where almost nothing escapes the lick of branding - whether it’s Liverpool Football Club, Louis Vuitton, Lady Gaga or Lyonnaise Potatoes. Brand status is, it seems, everything. For the readers of this journal, it is increasingly clear that city leaders feel they have no alternative but to board the ‘brandwagon’ in order to effectively compete in the global marketplace. In terms of our interest, many of the tools that were employed to create and sustain Brand Beckham are identical, or strikingly similar, to those used to Brand Barcelona, Brand Berlin and, for this study, Brand Belfast. Whilst this obsession with branding might seem remarkably innocent, maybe even frivolous, it has hugely important spatial implications. A key contention of this article is that planners are fully aboard the ‘brandwagon’. They are intimately involved in interventions that intentionally de- and re-construct the city’s urban fabric, built environment, cultural landscape and economic structure.

Given this, and the exponential increase in articles on place branding, experts are currently taking stock of the discipline and discussing new lines of empirical investigation and theoretical development (e.g. special issues of *Cities*, 2018; and *European Planning Studies*, 2020). We are interested in one strand of theory and analysis concerning city brand personality, and its links to place branding. In consumer behaviour research brand personality is used to study the appeal and attractiveness, and ultimately sales, of goods and services (Aaker, 1997). The place branding literature has begun to embrace this concept with analysts examining how brand personality can be usefully applied to cities (e.g. Amatyakul & Polyorat, 2018; Priporas et al, 2020; Sharifsamet et al, 2020; Soundari & Shankar, 2019). Extant research tends to follow a similar approach in testing for evidence of various brand personality attributes/traits/measures, usually using Aaker’s (1997) Brand Personality Scale.

This article is different. Firstly, compared to previous studies our spatial spotlight is unique because Belfast was the epicentre of Northern Ireland’s ‘Troubles’ where a devastating conflict seriously affected the city’s

image. Secondly, studies tend to generate rather static research findings, i.e. city brand personality at a point in time. This article adopts a more nuanced temporal approach by investigating Belfast's image transformation: from 'pariah city' (Neill, 1995) to 'post-conflict city' (Shirlow, 2006), and today's 'energised' and 'confident' city (Belfast City Council, 2017). We find significant image transformation has been achieved - driven by major planning interventions - but the city's contemporary 'brandwagon' still struggles with deep seated problems connected to its contested past. The article ends by reflecting on the broader implications for the city branding literature.

Research method

Belfast "offers an intriguing case study in the exercise of branding... a [city]... that bears a reputation for political dysfunction and violence" (Baker, 2020: 12). City branding analysts use quantitative and qualitative research methodologies (normally surveys or interviews) to test for the existence of various personality traits, and to measure their relative significance. For this research, the objective was not to test/measure personality traits in Belfast *per se*; rather, we wanted to analyse how the city's image changed over time and the recent engagement with brand personality. The research design has three components. The first engaged with the academic libraries on place branding, brand personality and city brand personality; this literature review provided the theoretical grounding for the research questions and underpinned the empirical analysis. Another literature review focused on expert articles examining the drivers and dynamics of city politics, urban transformation, and image change in Belfast. The second component involved secondary sources. We identified elite stakeholder websites (e.g. local authority, developers, consultants, and news media), and undertook web searches under specific headings: such as spatial planning, place branding, urban regeneration, economic development. This contextual information and official documents proved vital for the article. The final component involved video interviews - via Microsoft Teams - with branding professionals who are/were involved in the recent rebranding of Belfast. Despite difficulties created by the Coronavirus lockdown, we were able to interview senior figures from two branding consultants - Heavenly (Respondent A) and McCadden (Respondent B), and two senior representatives from Belfast City Council's Marketing and Communications Team (Respondents C & D). The expert insights generated from these interviews, alongside the other information sources, provided the evidence base and analytical rigour for the article.

Theoretical framework

There is a multidisciplinary body of literature on place branding that draws upon different theories and methodologies (Boisen et al, 2018; Braun et al, 2013; de Noronha et al, 2017; Hanna & Rowley, 2013; Kavaratzis, 2012; Lucarelli 2018). For centuries, economic territories have engaged in some form of image improvement and place promotion (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). Today, the wider context is the highly competitive global marketplace for private capital, sporting and cultural events, affluent consumers and professional labour (Cleave et al, 2017; Emirza & Seri, 2013; Kusumawati, 2019; Larsen, 2014; Priporas et al, 2020). On this, Peck (2015: 163) situates cities in “a war of all against all, battling for winning positions under globalizing disciplines”. Extending the analogy, van Ham (2002: 265) states “[b]rand States still ‘make war’ (and are themselves ‘made’ - i.e., shaped and constructed - by ‘war’), but here in a non-violent contest for market-share and visibility”. Competing to succeed in this militaristic environment, city planners and others involved in place management have adopted many of the ideas and practices of company, product and services branding (De Noni et al, 2014; Grenni et al, 2020; Kavaratzis, 2004, 2010; Lucarelli & Heldt Cassel, 2020; Porter, 2020; Van Assche et al, 2020). In this reading, as cities strive to distinguish themselves, create positive images and enhance their competitive position they are ‘developed as brands’, i.e. marketable commodities that are sold to consumers in a global marketplace (Cleave et al, 2016; Glińska & Gorbaniuk, 2016; Warnaby & Medway, 2013).

Important elements of the branding process are the construction of brand propositions to potential customers, and the congruence between brand identity (sender’s communication of the brand) and brand image (recipient’s perception of the brand) (Glińska & Kilon, 2014; Kaplan et al, 2010). The perceived importance of branding is the ability to influence people’s processes of cognition and affective mindset operating on a deep psychological level (Kavaratzis, 2015; Oliveira, 2015); what Larsen (2014) terms a ‘cognitive-emotional construct’. Bringing these observations together, Kavaratzis (2007: 702-703) identifies two key premises of branding theory:

“The first is that the city takes its form, content and meaning in peoples’ minds... The second premise is only an extension of the first. It assumes that the best way to attempt to influence peoples’ perceptions and images about cities is the same way that businesses have been successfully attempting the same for their products and services, namely branding. In other words, we should manage cities in the same way we manage other brands, because branding deals with such mental images or mental maps”.

Building on this theorisation, our interviews sought the views of private sector branding consultants. Respondent A offered the following insight - note the nods to academic criticism of city branding, and the relevance of history and change to Belfast:

“Branding goes deeper in terms of trying to shape the way that a place behaves going forward. The way it interacts with its audiences. The way it shapes the experiences and the character of any brand. But certainly, any place is important to that, and I guess it’s the same as you and me that your character is shaped by your past, your history, your circumstances, your experiences. And that’s true of a place. So, on the one hand people can sometimes see that aspect of places being quite superficial and ephemeral and not important. And in some cases, kind of false or imposed. But if you think about a place brand much more about trying to find a way of capturing the essence of what the place is rather than trying to change it, then perhaps we get into an area where people feel more comfortable. We try and find a way of reflecting the character of a place rather than build some kind of false premise around the place” (Interview July 2020).

Academic and professional insights open up interesting ontological, epistemological and methodological lines of inquiry (Campelo, 2017; Gertner et al, 2011; Hankinson, 2010; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2010; Lucarelli & Berg, 2011; Vuignier, 2017). We focus on a subset of theory and policy. The first point is the brand personality of products, services and destinations has gained increasing recognition (Prayag, 2007; Sweeney & Brandon, 2006). According to Aaker (1997: 347), “brand personality is defined formally here as the set of human characteristics associated with a brand”. This *animism* or *anthropomorphisation* helps to capture market share and brand loyalty (Opoku & Hinson, 2006). For Aaker (1997) brand personality correlates to consumer personality given consumers express their self-belief through purchasing branded commodities, e.g. ‘cool’ Coca Cola, or ‘sophisticated’ BMW. Such that, “commercial brands - from Nike to Gucci - have become the focus for the individual’s identity” (van Ham, 2002: 255). In this sense, “consumers... prefer brands with personalities that are congruent with their own personality” (Usakli & Baloglu, 2011: 115; also, Lee & Suh, 2011; Sariyer, 2017). Aaker’s (1997) key contribution is her Brand Personality Scale (BPS) consisting of five personality dimensions: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness, plus 42 personality traits. Although there is criticism of Aaker’s approach¹ it is widely acknowledged that the “BPS remains the most trusted and reliable measure to assess brand personality amongst different studies” (Sharifsamet et al, 2020: 61; also Glińska & Kilon, 2014; Kumar, 2018).

¹ These include: ‘conceptual confusion’ as the definition of brand personality is ‘too broad’; its ‘theoretical foundations’ and ‘overly large’ number of dimensions; reading off human personality traits with respect to brands; ‘fixing’ certain dimensions of brand personality; and the ‘universal applicability’ of the brand personality scale to different places and cultures (Anandkumar & George, 2011; Davies et al, 2018; Malik & Naeem, 2013).

For our interest, brand personality has recently been applied to spatial economies. An understanding of how people choose brands that reflect their own personality is applied to cities due to similarities, e.g. trust and customer satisfaction, and personality traits, e.g. friendliness and reliability. On this, van Ham (2003: 251) refers to the “‘brandology’ business... using the templates and ways of thinking developed for commercial brands (ranging from Volvo to l’Oréal) to brand territory”. Davies et al (2018: 116) elaborate, “[t]he setting for the use of brand personification broadened further with its application in location studies and specifically to the marketing of cities”. Brand personality contributes to the construction, shaping and management of a city’s image as it seeks to become more distinctive, and thereby competitive, in the global marketplace (Amatyakul & Polyorat, 2016; Glińska & Gorbaniuk, 2016). One reason for this explosion of interest is that brand personality has become a “strategic marketing tool for the new economy” (Kaplan et al, 2010: 1287). It is argued that a city with a strong, positive and attractive brand personality is more capable of competing for mobile capital, international tourists and talented labour, thereby creating the conditions for employment growth and wealth creation (Sharifsamet et al, 2020; Vinyals-Mirabent et al, 2019). The literature on tourism is particularly pronounced² as cities, including Belfast, seek to cultivate a competitive advantage over rivals by developing their destination personality, e.g. exciting, attractive, stimulating, convivial (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Hosany et al, 2006; Lee & Suh, 2011; Sahin & Baloglu, 2011; Usakli & Baloglu, 2011).

Limitations in the literature, and research questions

Aaker’s BPS is exclusively reliant on ‘positive attributes’ (Malik & Naeem, 2013). Therefore, in missing out those with a negative bent her model does not capture the full range of brand personalities (Amatyakul & Polyorat, 2016; Anandkumar & George, 2011; Sweeney & Brandon, 2006). To address this limitation, Davies et al (2001: 124) argue, “[f]uture work is necessary to identify other dimensions particularly those that could reveal less positive aspects”. Following this call, Kaplan et al’s (2010) Turkish study reveals the ‘dark side’, focusing on the negative aspects of malignancy. In China d’Astous & Li (2009) highlight the potential for wickedness in a place’s brand personality that includes dimensions such as vulgar, offender, immoral, fighter and violent. In addition, Ahmad et al’s (2013) Malaysian study suggests cities can be associated with negative personality traits that are like humans. Importantly, these studies reveal city brand

² Studies cover many parts of the world: e.g. Cape Town, South Africa (Prayag, 2007); Gold Coast, Australia (Merrilees et al, 2009); Kayseri, Turkey (Emirza & Seri, 2013); Milan, Italy (De Noni et al, 2014); Shanghai, China (Larsen, 2014); Bucharest, Romania (Ochkovskaya, 2016); Madrid, Spain (Garcia et al, 2018); Khon Kaen, Thailand (Amatyakul & Polyorat, 2018); Coimbatore, India (Soundari & Shankar, 2019); Thessaloniki, Greece (Priporas et al, 2020) and Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia (Ahmad, 2018).

personalities can be bright/positive, e.g. sincere, exciting, and dark/negative, e.g. malignant, wicked, and unsafe.

This article develops the debate further. Most studies focus on city brand personality at a point in time, so in a sense they are relatively static in their findings. This is not to devalue their importance; however, the temporal dimension is equally portentous in terms of how cities deal with historically debilitating place imagery. This crucial issue is not covered in depth by the literature. Relatedly, nor is there much discussion or detailed analysis of the problematic tensions between historical and contemporary city images and associated personality traits. When these are covered, it constitutes the mere co-existence of positive and negative personality traits, rather than an exploration of the challenges and problems this creates for those involved in city branding. Our two research questions address these limitations in the literature. RQ #1: what drivers and dynamics are involved in changing a city's image over time? RQ #2: what tensions exist between a city's historical and contemporary place imagery and associated brand personality? These questions are explored through the lens of Belfast, the capital city of Northern Ireland.

Belfast's changing place imagery

Negativity of the 'Troubles'

Sariyer (2017: 51) argues, "to create and sustain the personality of places in particular is difficult". This is very true for Belfast given that it was the focal point of Northern Ireland's "Troubles"³. Connecting to Warnaby's (2018) territorological perspective, it was a conflict over a land border, cultural identities and political sovereignty; a conflict that located tribalised communities to geographic space and violent expressions of territoriality; a conflict that created a segregated society; a conflict that cost thousands of lives. Interestingly, during the "Troubles" self-styled Loyalist and Republican paramilitary 'volunteers'⁴ regarded themselves as 'defenders' of their respective Protestant and Catholic communities; using the vernacular of geopolitics they, and many in their own areas, regarded themselves as guardians of Northern Ireland's British status or deliverers of a future United Ireland. Reading these previous times through the contemporary theoretical spectacles of brand personality, Belfast emitted an extremely 'dark side' and 'negative aspects' (after Kaplan, et al, 2010) of fear, insecurity, violence, danger that tarnished the city and became

³ In 1921, the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland divided the island of Ireland into two separate political jurisdictions (Gould, 2012). Six northeastern counties (with an in-built Protestant majority) became Northern Ireland while the remaining 26 counties formed the Free State or Eire; from 1949, it became the Republic of Ireland. From 1968, onwards fierce violence erupted between Republican and Loyalist paramilitaries; the former seeking a united Irish Republic, the latter defending Northern Ireland's British status.

⁴ Loyalist paramilitary groups involved the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF); Republican paramilitaries included the Irish Republican Army (IRA, of which there have been many incarnations), and the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA).

so problematic in terms of the politics of place. Moreover, despite the rather benign language of ‘defenders’ and ‘volunteers’ the reality is paramilitaries epitomised the worst excesses of ‘wickedness’ (after d’Astous & Li, 2009), ‘immoral behaviour’ and ‘criminal activity’ (after Keel & Natarajan, 2012) in bigotry and brutality, control and cruelty, murder and malevolence, torture and territoriality. For example, over three decades (1968-1998) 3,700 people lost their lives in Northern Ireland and upwards of 50,000 were physically, emotionally and psychologically traumatised.

Devine et al (2017: 268) explain, “the Troubles tore Northern Ireland apart and it had a devastating effect on the people, economy and image of the country”. The implications of negative place imagery were extensive and enduring. Almost daily incidents of terror and turmoil were splashed across the front pages of national newspapers and headlined television and radio reports around the world. As the most socio-spatially divided city between Catholic-Irish-Nationalists and Protestant-British-Unionists, the Belfast ‘battlefield’ was the centre of violence: 1,400 people died, over 20,000 injured (Nagle, 2020). Brown et al (2013a: 1257) cite the “infamous side of Belfast’s image - political strife, ethnic conflict”. It was a city synonymous with bombs, bullets, and bloodshed, and riven by distrust, division, and disorder. Fiona Gilmore, a leading branding consultant who advised the Council in the 1990s, admitted “Working in Belfast... the author came to realise the greatest challenge was to refute the stereotypical imagery, mainly stimulated by the stark, uncompromising (often black and white) pictures on the front pages of the press” (Gilmore, 2001: 283). The depth of this negativity had deleterious consequences. Connecting to the literature, in a malignant, unsafe, wicked and insecure environment (after d’Astous & Li, 2009; Kaplan et al, 2010) popular tourism was almost non-existent with the city centre encircled by “a heavily fortified ‘ring of steel’ defaced by a series of bombing attacks” (O’Dowd & Komarova, 2013: 538). Relatedly, the scarring of scathing stereotyping meant Belfast became starved of investment so the city, and the wider region, became reliant on UK Government subvention to support the economy. Today, concerns over dependency on the public sector for GDP and employment feed plans to ‘rebalance the economy’ towards the private sector and inward investment (Brownlow & Birnie, 2018). More theoretically, this reflects an exposure to the ‘competitiveness mantra’ and ‘conventional economics’ of neoliberalism (Boland, 2014; Ramsey, 2013). The belief in a - neoliberal-inspired - ‘transition’ from State-dependency to self-sufficiency was evident in our interviews:

“I think the interesting point is that’s just a transition of moving away from that kind of dependency on State support to a much more entrepreneurial local economy. That kind of sustains itself and drives itself forward” (Respondent B, interview June 2020).

Image improvement: planning and regeneration

State-initiated image improvement began in the 1980s as the ‘Troubles’ wreaked havoc on society and the economy. By 1998, 25 public service commercials commissioned by the Northern Ireland Office were screened into people’s homes across the country. These short films constituted “a five-year strategy to use television adverts to get the government’s message across” (McTear, 2018). By the mid-1990s, the message shifted from security and safety to hope and reconciliation, reflecting Government intentions to “present the region in a better light” (Baker, 2017: 5). While *A Future* (1988) captured Belfast as a war-torn ‘urban dystopia’, *A New Era* (1994) - coinciding with a paramilitary ceasefire - focused on ‘peace and social renewal’. Then, in 1995, two advertisements emphasised the country’s commercial credentials. *Northern Irish Quality* celebrated the region’s sporting and cultural qualities (George Best, Mary Peters, and Liam Neeson), while *Northern Irish Spirit* promoted a nascent tourism industry. Baker (2017: 7) argues this ‘remarkable transformation’ aimed to “rebrand Northern Ireland as a region “open for business””. In another article, he claims the films “encourage[d] local viewers... to see and think about the region as a potentially lucrative commodity in the global marketplace” (Baker, 2020: 17). Central to this was the link between social progress and economic growth, in that a settled society would attract investment, tourists, events, labour, and students (Coulter, 2019; Jewesbury, 2012; Knox, 2016; Murtagh & Shirlow, 2012; Nagle, 2020).

The relationship between spatial planning and city branding is very topical (special issue of *European Planning Studies*, 2020, 28:7). Indeed, it was something that featured strongly in our fieldwork conversations with key local stakeholders. A private sector interviewee stated, “Planning interventions are crucial in terms of rebranding the city” (Respondent A, interview July 2020). Similarly, an interviewee from the Council’s Marketing and Communications Team argued:

“Absolutely I think more than ever like any of the conferences I’ve been to this year and last year were run by City, Nation, Place. The guest speakers were actually people that worked in planning. If you have a strategy for the city like the Belfast Agenda [Community Plan], and you have really progressive targets to meet, like bringing in so much investment, increasing the population and new houses, planning is a catalyst to make that happen. It’s very important... I see planners as place-makers more than anything” (Respondent C, interview July 2020).

Insert Image 1 here

Tasty ingredients in Belfast’s branding dish were sourced from the city planning menu. Neill (2006: 109) notes, “[u]rban planning and development have long been at the forefront of official efforts in Belfast to

project an image of the possibility and incipient reality of a more normal city”. Similarly, for Hadaway (2014: 58) “planners and policy makers were trying to imagine a new identity or brand for the city that would challenge negative perceptions in the market place” (Jewesbury, 2012, is more disparaging in referencing ‘lurid fantasies’). Major planning projects regenerated the decrepit and dilapidated built environment of key economic spaces, enabling the shift from a ‘Kafkaesque’ (Neill, 2006) to ‘post-conflict’ city (Shirlow, 2006). Laganside Development Corporation spearheaded Belfast’s waterfront reimagining during the 1990s, spending £1 billion bringing 300 acres of derelict land and disused buildings back into productive use (Waterfront Hall, Odyssey Arena, Cathedral Quarter, Gasworks). Early 2000s, Laganside was eclipsed by the sheer ambition and budget (£7 billion) of Titanic Quarter (TQ: see Image 1) (Boland et al, 2017; Coyles, 2013; Hadaway, 2014; Hodson, 2019; Neill, 2014; Ramsey, 2013). Like Laganside, at 185 acres TQ was a colossal urban planning initiative; promoted as a ‘city within a city’. TQ contains residential, commercial and leisure spaces, and is home to Titanic Belfast (see Image 2), Titanic Studios, Northern Ireland Science Park and Titanic Hotel. In June 2019, planning approval was granted for the £400 million Belfast Waterside (see Image 3). The 16-acre former Sirocco Engineering site on the eastern edge of the River Lagan will be transformed into offices, apartments, creative hub, hotel, hospitality units, community, and leisure facilities. Buoyed by predictions of 8,000 jobs and 1,500 housing units (20% affordable, 10% social), the website adopts futuristic language in claiming, “It’s an opportunity for tomorrow” (www.thewatersidebelfast.com).

Insert Image 2 here

Insert Image 3 here

The regeneration of Laganside and TQ transformed the dockland economy away from shipbuilding to financial services, heritage tourism and film making. Moreover, waterfront redevelopment “help[ed] transform perceptions of Belfast” (Ramsey, 2013: 169) as these spaces symbolised the safe and shiny ‘New Belfast’ (Neill et al, 2014). Titanic and screen production are particularly prominent. Once the economic opportunities of branding Belfast-built Titanic became clear, the “project concept and brand... has been embraced with gusto by all official place promotion agencies in Belfast” (Neill, 2011: 74). Hadaway (2014: 59) claims Titanic Belfast “emerged as the most ambitious re-imaginings of the Titanic myth... the city’s ‘new cultural icon’ and... ‘world class visitor experience’” (also Brown et al, 2013b; Neill, 2006). For Baker (2020: 18) filming HBO’s *Game of Thrones* in Belfast and other locations “is without question the region’s finest marketing achievement” (on economic impact see Ramsey et al, 2019). On the most recent waterfront project, Chair of the Council’s Planning Committee, Councillor John Hussey, argued, “The development of Belfast’s Waterside will mark a significant step forward in Belfast’s regeneration” (cited in

Belfast City Council, 2020). His predecessor, Councillor Arder Carson, cited the impact on the city's image "as Belfast continues to grow in stature internationally as a great place to do business" (cited in BBC News NI, 2019).

Ramsey (2013) argues waterfront rejuvenation was driven forward by 'development interests'. More generally, Neill cites a *Developer Charter* involving a 'close growth coalition' between the local authority and private sector, whereby "[p]referred developer status to major players and streamlined planning for major projects is rarely questioned" (2011: 82) leading to a "lack of transparency and openness" and "disproportionate influence over planning decisions" (2014: 84). On Belfast's uniqueness and the link between peace and prosperity, Jewesbury (2012: 99) informs "private developers found themselves imbued with a new moral mission. They would be the ones who really delivered the peace, in brick, concrete, glass and steel". The symbiotic relationship between urban planning and development interests is very evident in the city centre. A frequent target of Republican paramilitary attacks - destruction of 300 retail outlets and one quarter retail floor space (Nagle, 2020) - back in 1978 the then Secretary of State identified the city centre as critical to the 'rebirth/creation' of a new Belfast (Neill et al, 2014). Major retail-led projects - Castle Court (1990) and Victoria Square (2008) - improved Belfast's image as a regional shopping centre. Running alongside these retail-led planning interventions were infrastructural, public art and public realm projects⁵ (£2 billion budget). The projects delivered a 'facelift' for Belfast enabling the city to 'distance itself' from the 'disturbing reality' of its past by replacing sectarian iconography with contemporary art (Hocking, 2015; Neill, 2006, 2011). The most recent significant, and controversial, planning project is 'Tribeca Belfast' (see Image 4), a £500 million 12-acre mixed use project (apartments, offices, culture, nightlife, shopping, public space) on the north east fringe of the city centre. The website declares "A new destination for Belfast. Bringing together a new way of working, living and shopping in the heart of the city centre" (www.tribeca-belfast.co.uk; on class dynamics see Baker, 2020, on local opposition [450 letters of objection] see BBC News NI, 2020a, b).

Insert Image 4 here

Through these planning policies city leaders were "seeking to reverse the image of conflict" (Coyles, 2013: 332), and 'neutralise' the city centre thereby encouraging a return to this key economic space for normal daily activities (Neill, 1995). The safety situation was improved after paramilitary ceasefires in the mid and

⁵ For example, *Rise* in West Belfast and *Spirit of Belfast* in the city centre.

late 1990s, while the Good Friday Agreement meant the ‘Troubles’ were officially over and sectarian violence all but came to an end. In terms of this journal, these interventions show that “place marketing encompasses more than just place promotion: It also involves designed policies to improve places and their public management” (Zenker, 2018: 1). Regarding research question #1, we have witnessed a significant shift in Belfast’s core image from a ‘violently-contested city’ (O’Dowd & Komarova, 2013) to a ‘post-violent city’ (Murtagh, 2018; on America see Gould & Skinner, 2007; Gould, 2012). Underpinning this was a strongly held belief amongst elected politicians, policy-makers and spatial planners that “urban beautification and economic regeneration could erase the stain of the ‘Troubles’ and allow Belfast to flourish as merely ‘another’ UK city” (Hodson, 2019: 233). Compared to other studies we offer a more nuanced exploration of this mostly ignored temporal dimension. In so doing, the analysis plugs a significant gap in the literature regarding the drivers and dynamics, particularly spatial planning, of how a city transitions from a negative to positive place imagery.

Boarding Belfast’s ‘brandwagon’

An ‘energised’ and ‘confident’ brand personality

This section addresses Belfast City Council’s recent engagement with branding professionals. Summer 2007 marks a turning point in the city’s ‘brandwagon’ with the Council reappraising its approach to place branding, creating a new Belfast brand and engaging with brand personality. Then Lord Mayor Jim Rodgers explained, “We feel the time is propitious to develop a fresh branding for the city” (cited in Northover, 2010: 105). A respondent from the Council’s Marketing and Communications Team offered these insights into the local authority’s thinking:

“There was kind of an educational piece to be done within the Council itself as well about branding. The brand was more than just a logo. And that’s why there was an awful lot of work had to be done internally to distil between the Belfast City Council corporate brands and the Belfast brand because really the Belfast brand belongs to the entire city... Whilst the Council took the leadership role, with this new brand really, you know we wanted it to belong to the city and when I say talk about the city, I talk about, you know public and private sector and the citizens as well... There was so many projects and initiatives and programmes going on within each of those departments, and the brand was sitting in isolation. So a key part of my job was to actually go in and work with those departments and let them understand the brand, because an awful lot of the outputs of what the Belfast Agenda was trying to do will be delivered through those departments and city partners... So slowly but surely, you can see how they started to adopt the brand tone of voice... To me that’s that has been a key progression” (Respondent C, interview July 2020).

As noted above and in the literature (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005; Lucarelli & Berg, 2011; Vuignier, 2017), city branders employ catchy logos and slogans to capture the essence and lure of a place. Belfast's slogans can be traced back several decades - even during the 'Troubles': 'Belfast is Buzzing' (1980s), 'Belfast Better Believe It' (1990s), 'This is Our Moment' (2009), 'Our Time Our Place' (2012) and (discussed below) 'Energy Unleashed' (2017). Interestingly, the impetus for joining the global 'brandwagon' was the limitations of the city's logo (see Image 5) and the need for a more coordinated approach to branding Belfast:

"The process behind the creation of a new brand for Belfast commenced in June 2007 with the appointment of Lloyd Northover, international brand consultants. It was clear at this stage that the formal 'Smiley Face' logo developed in 1997 was largely redundant. Many new logos had been developed on an ad hoc basis which had led to multiple messages being given out about Belfast. In an increasingly competitive city market it was agreed that the time had come to renew the Belfast brand" (Belfast City Council, 2007).

Insert Image 5 here

Reflecting theory, Respondent B revealed how, for the first time, Lloyd Northover focused on teasing out the personality of the new Belfast:

"Back in the 90s, Belfast had this terribly apologetic logo, which was Belfast City Council and a wee 'Smiley Face' logo, and you know, the 'Troubles' were still at their height... Looking back with the benefit of hindsight, you can see that it was, you know, it was such a lack of confidence and it was almost saying 'We're really not that bad. You know, we were actually a really nice place'. In 2007 Belfast City Council put together a process where they wanted to re-evaluate the whole city branding... A company from London came first called Lloyd Northover and they actually did it right for the first time in the sense that that they did an awful lot of research to try and get a sense of what is the personality of this place" (Interview June 2020).

Insert Image 6 here

Company Chairman, Jim Northover, emphasised the turning point by stating, "this was the beginning of rewriting a story about Belfast, not only one that was recognisably honest and truthful, but also one that

cast the city in a new light” (Northover, 2010: 108). Amid claims of wide public consultation and stakeholder engagement on 1st July 2008, the Belfast B campaign was launched (see Image 6). Connecting to theory, it represented a human centred link to branding Belfast, i.e. animism and anthropomorphisation, with local people encouraged to ‘Be Part of It’. However, the campaign courted controversy for being too bland and its estimated cost of £500,000 (Moore, 2016). Brown et al (2013a) explain that although city leaders embraced the branding campaign it received criticism from other stakeholders, notably ‘irate town planners’. Strikingly, the Lord Mayor was so dissatisfied he refused to sign off the logo (Edgar, 2008). Respondent B reveals how circumstances conspired to undermine the support for and success of Belfast B:

“Unfortunately, the design, which is called the Belfast B, they run out of money basically and they put this terrible design out there and it wasn’t supported by people in the city. Nobody really knew the good thinking behind it and the whole thing sort of died. It ended up becoming a Council logo that was stuck on everything and people did not really know what the point was” (Interview June 2020).

A decade later, the Council jumped upon its second ‘brandwagon’. A local authority representative acknowledged that Belfast B was not ‘fit for purpose’, and the need for a fresh approach to Belfast’s brand positionality:

“I think back in 2017, you know what should this brand stand for? What’s the feeling and where does it kind of position itself? The Council decided that they needed to rebrand, so it was really to do with the Belfast Agenda, which is the strategic document. The vision for the city of Belfast, and that was really spearheaded by Susanne Wiley, our Chief Executive at the time. Against the principles of the Belfast Agenda: Belfast, as a place to live, to work to study and visit. That’s the guiding principles in terms for me on the ground. They realised that the Belfast B just wasn’t gonna be fit for purpose” (Respondent D, interview July 2020).

Insert Image 7 here

The Council sought the services of two companies: Heavenly, from Cardiff, undertook the research and brand construction while McCadden, based in Belfast, produced the artwork and graphic design. The Belfast B logo was replaced with a Starburst brandmark (see Image 7) that “takes its inspiration from a satellite view of Belfast... a container into which we will pour all of Belfast’s rich diversity... it is a symbol

of our city's energy" (Belfast City Council, 2017). The buzzword is *Energy* and the tagline is *Energy Unleashed*. An interesting aspect of this energy is the desire to move beyond the conflict "For too long we've been held back but now we're ready to surge forward, to relish change, be positive and reach outward" (<https://belfastbrand.com/>). The official document elaborates:

"Belfast today is full of ambition, optimism and above all energy.

A great city, held back for too long.

Now looking forward. And outward.

Ready to tell our story to the world.

You can feel this energy; it touches all who live here or visit us.

It drives opportunity, powers entrepreneurs, and empowers our youth.

Ready for investment, ready for visitors, ready for fresh challenges.

A resurgent city, re-imagined, re-energised.

Welcome to energy unleashed" (Belfast City Council, 2017).

In addition to energy, another dimension to Belfast's brand personality is confidence:

"It's how we behave that will reflect this confident personality and it's how we look and sound that will communicate it to the world.

The Belfast brand identity is our tool for projecting the positive, distinguishing associations that will capture the world's imagination, attracting visitors, students, investment, talent, jobs and ultimately, prosperity. It's also something that we can use locally to instil pride, give us a sense of who we are and help us to unite across all parts of the city and all walks of life. We all make Belfast what it is so, ultimately, this identity is for us" (<https://belfastbrand.com/>).

A senior figure from Heavenly explained the process and thinking behind the rebranding strategy:

"The idea of *Energy Unleashed* was actually something that was one of the options that was on the table when we were looking at the whole of Northern Ireland, and one of the reasons it was rejected was because it was felt to be more appropriate for Belfast rather than for the whole of Northern Ireland. The resurrected idea of *Energy Unleashed* we felt captured the spirit of the place as it is. We detected an impatience and energy, frustration. In some cases, people want to push forward and that kind of palpable sense of enthusiasm and energy which had been held back for

so long. For obvious reasons we felt a strong premise on which to build a brand idea and that's really how we came about" (Respondent A, interview July 2020).

A senior figure from McCadden reinforced the point, and in so doing nodded to brand personality:

"It's driven by energy. Absolutely. That's it. I think that Belfast needs to project itself as just being hungry. You know, hungry for investment and hungry for foreign students and for visitors because we realised that you know, I think we're a great wee city. But people have a huge amount of choice where they go. Be they visitors, investors, or students. So why would they come here? And there's no doubt I think it's human beings, we are pre-programmed to be defined by energy and enthusiasm. Yeah, that's what the whole personality is based upon. And the good thing is it is true, not just making it up" (Respondent B, interview June 2020).

The brand values and brand personality traits are *unpretentious*, *ambitious*, *imagination* and *self-belief*. Unpretentious refers to Belfast being 'real and gritty' given that local people are 'straightforward', 'down to earth' and 'honest'; ambitious because people are 'determined and single-minded' who 'want the best for Belfast and each other'; imagination relates to 'we imagined a city at peace' and this was delivered; self-belief because 'we can achieve what we wish for' irrespective of any barriers. Respondents reiterated the absolute relevance of these attributes to Belfast, and acknowledged they were equally applicable to cities such as Cardiff, Glasgow and Liverpool. A senior figure from McCadden claimed "As Belfast born and bred, I thought you know what that is spot on" (Respondent B, interview June 2020). A senior figure from Heavenly elaborated:

"They were felt to be genuinely representative of the character of the place that we experienced not just on this project, but by doing you know, the way to Northern Ireland's peace. I guess over the last five years, longer than that, now six or seven years I've spent a lot of time in the city and I think those characteristics are obviously positive, but I think they are representative of the people in the places that we encountered. And certainly, when we were doing testing of a range of potential values, I really didn't have any pushback from people... Yeah, and we thought that they were both positive and appropriate for Belfast and the people we tested them with felt that too" (Respondent A, interview July 2020).

The section above discussed the Council's recent engagement with branding professionals. This has led to the construction of a new Belfast brand that is driven by the brand personality traits of 'confidence' and 'energy'. We now move on to set Belfast's 'brandwagon' against some everyday lived realities in the city.

Belfast 'brandwagon' and lived realities

Destination personality, brand identity, brand image

Following the above discussion, this section analyses destination personality, and the tensions between brand identity and brand image. The brand personality literature reveals the harm that a malignant/violent/unsafe image inflicts upon a city's economic fortunes due to a lack of investment, tourism and jobs (Ahmad, 2018; Glińska & Gorbaniuk, 2016; Kaplan et al, 2010; Sahin & Baloglu, 2011; Tugulea, 2017). The impact of the 'Troubles' on Belfast is a prescient example. In contradistinction, the benefits that accrue from a safe destination image are, self-evidently, more positive. Recalibrating Belfast's image away from the negativity of the conflict towards a non-violent, peaceful, friendly city was crucial in transforming Belfast into a serious site for investors, workers, visitors, shoppers, and students. Moreover, for many years Belfast has been building its reputation as an events city (Northern Ireland Tourist Board, 2014). Devine et al (2017: 266, 268) read hosting events as "post-war recovery strategies" that soften the hard/un-desirable images of conflict and "showcase... a safe and attractive place to visit, live, study and invest". Hosting various events (see below) was largely un-heard of during the 'Troubles', so it reflects a transmogrified image from the violence of the 'Troubles' to the (relative) safety of a 'post-conflict city'. Connecting to theory, we suggest this represents the emergence of a safe, attractive, and exciting destination personality (after Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Sahin & Baloglu, 2011; Vinyals-Mirabent et al, 2019).

As evidence, Belfast hosted keynote international cultural and sporting events: MTV European Music Awards 2011 put the city 'on the world music stage' (TV audience of 1.2 billion, 23,989 media articles), World Police and Fire Games 2013, Grand Depart for Giro d'Italia 2014 and Tall Ships 2015⁶. There are also plans for Belfast to secure UNESCO City of Music by 2023 amid claims that music generates £90 million for the Northern Ireland economy (Meredith, 2019)⁷. On October 22nd 2019, Belfast was named the 'Best Events Destination' for a second consecutive year at the Conference and Incentive Travel Magazine Awards (Northern Ireland Business First, 2019). Prior to the Coronavirus lockdown, Tourism NI, in partnership with Visit Belfast, announced a prestigious international buyer's conference (HelmsBriscoe) for March 2020 drawing representatives from 55 countries (NewsLetter, 2019). Sarah Gribben, Head of

⁶ Other parts of Northern Ireland have also hosted important events such as G8 summit in 2013 in Fermanagh, Derry~Londonderry UK City of Culture in 2013, and the British Open Golf 2019 in Portrush.

⁷ However, Belfast lost the opportunity to host the 2021 Youth Commonwealth Games due to an inability to guarantee funding (BBC News NI, 2018).

Business Tourism for Visit Belfast, argues, “Belfast and Northern Ireland are firmly established as top destinations for international events” (cited in NewsLetter, 2019). For Aoife Fee, Tourism NI’s Business and Solutions Manager, event hosting is “crucial for our local tourism economy” as it “puts Belfast on the map as a leading destination” (cited in NewsLetter, 2019). Tourism is a key indicator of a positive destination personality. In late 2017, Lonely Planet rated Belfast and the Causeway Coast as the world’s best region for tourism for 2018 (Nisbett & Rapson, 2020). Official figures show that in the year to March 2019, there were 5.1 million overnight trips, 16.3 million nights spent and £963 million spend in the regional economy (NISRA, 2019). This has been boosted by the massive increase in mega cruise ships docking in Belfast, from 62 in 2013 to 128 in 2018. An interesting by-product of the peace dividend is many of these international tourists seek out previously unsafe areas of the city, i.e. ‘dark tourism’ (Leonard, 2012; Nisbett & Rapson, 2020; Skinner, 2016).

Notwithstanding such progress, “within the Nationalist and Unionist communities political tension and sectarian strife are never far from the surface” (Devine et al, 2017: 273; also Gould & Skinner, 2007; McDowell et al, 2017). Knox (2016: 485) refers to “an insidious undercurrent of ...Loyalist and Republican activities”. Given that Ireland remains partitioned ‘dissident’ Irish Republicans continue to wage a war of violence against institutions and agents of the British ‘colonial’ State (Bean, 2012; Marchment et al, 2019; Topping & Byrne, 2012). According to the Commissioner of An Garda Síochána (Irish Police Force) ‘dissidents’ represent “the biggest threat on the island of Ireland” (Drew Harris cited in Hoey, 2019: 74). They are responsible for murdering security force personnel⁸ and numerous bomb attacks/scares⁹ including the 2005 Belfast Marathon resulting in very few international runners (Devine et al, 2017). In April 2019, the killing of journalist Lyra McKee¹⁰ disgusted the public mood so much that it forced political leaders to enter discussions aimed at re-opening Northern Ireland’s political institutions that had lay inactive for 36 months¹¹. Then there are concerns over ‘culturicide’ within Protestant-Unionist-Loyalist (PUL) communities (Hearty, 2015). In late 2012 to early 2013, this came to the surface during the flag protest¹²

⁸ These include British soldiers Patrick Azimkar and Mark Quinsey (8th March 2009), Police Constables Stephen Carroll (10th March 2009) and Ronan Kerr (12th April 2011) and Prison Officers David Black (1st November 2012) and Adrian Ismay (4th March 2016).

⁹ During 2017 alone, there were 58 shootings and 32 bomb attacks: “an 8 year high” (Hoey, 2019: 74).

¹⁰ The New IRA (an umbrella name for splinter ‘dissident’ groups) shot dead the 29-year-old who was covering rioting against the police (or ‘Crown Forces’ in the eyes of ‘dissidents’) in the Creggan area of Derry.

¹¹ In January 2020, after three years of deadlock, the political institutions of Northern Ireland (Executive and Assembly) were finally restored.

¹² On 3rd December 2012, Belfast City Council voted to limit the ‘designated’ days the Union Flag would fly over City Hall. This caused anger and upset amongst the PUL community - an erosion of their British identity/culture - leading to, often unruly, demonstrations in Belfast. Some 140 police officers were injured and over 200 people were arrested. Offences included rioting, highjacking vehicles, and attacks of politicians’ offices. Hearty (2015) argues the flag decision ‘lit the powder keg’ of a deep sense of ‘disillusionment and abandonment’ amongst working class PUL communities; interestingly, anger was also directed at their own (middle class) political leaders in ‘Big House’ Unionism.

that led to months of sporadic ‘riotous exchanges’ on the streets of Belfast before spreading to other parts of the country (Halliday & Ferguson, 2016; Knox, 2016). The flag protest, and ongoing controversy over parading (Coulter & Shirlow, 2019), “created enormous division and political instability in cities, towns and villages across Northern Ireland” (McDowell et al, 2017: 197). Specifically, it had a significant impact during the 2013 World Police and Fire Games (WPFG) - the third largest participatory sporting event in the world. The dangerous public disorder was covered by the global news media at the same time that international competitors and their families were arranging travel plans.

Devine et al’s (2017) study of social media reveals negative perceptions of Belfast’s security situation affected attendance levels for the WPFG, e.g. ‘very disturbing’, ‘history of violence’, ‘not willing to take a chance’. This shows how a resurfacing of ‘vulnerability and risk’ can compromise the construction of a positive destination personality (after Ekinici & Hosany, 2006). In this instance, there is a clear contrast between brand identity, i.e. safe city and ‘positive associations’ *portrayed* by Belfast City Council (2017), and brand image, i.e. violence and disorder, *received* by potential international visitors. In the theoretical literature, this is evidence of the “mismatch between desired and perceived images” (Vinyals-Mirabent et al, 2019: 149). In the local literature, incidents involving ‘dissident’ Republican violence and PUL disorder add weight to claims that Belfast remains a ‘contested city’ as opposed to the cuddlier narrative of a ‘shared city’ (O’Dowd & Komarova, 2013). This chimes with Hearty’s (2015: 159) notion of a “‘not war, not peace’ context of post-conflict”, and Murtagh’s (2018: 439) reference to “the resilience of extant paramilitaries, crime and anti-social behaviour”. Taking these issues together Devine et al (2017: 276-277, our brackets) highlight:

“The damage that was done to Northern Ireland’s [and Belfast’s] image. Although the flag protests were not aimed at the WPFGs this event indirectly heightened awareness of the problems that were taking place in Northern Ireland [Belfast primarily] to an international audience... Consequently, Northern Ireland [and Belfast] was once again being discussed (online and offline) for all the wrong reasons and these discussions reinforced the negative stereotypical images of Northern Ireland [and Belfast]... In the case of Northern Ireland [Belfast particularly], the violent attacks by the dissidents (Nationalist) and the ‘flag protests’ (Unionist) suggest that sectarianism and intolerance remains an issue at community level”.

Additionally, tensions between Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party - dominant Republican and Unionist parties - at Stormont where the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive sit have been ex-

tremely difficult, often unworkable. Between 1999 and 2007, the institutions collapsed five times. In January 2017 they collapsed again - precipitated by 'a bitter row' between the two parties over a botched heating scheme¹³ (McBride, 2019) - remaining inactive for three years. The inability to have fully functioning institutions in Belfast and the ethno-tribal politicking reflected very poorly on the capital city, and severely undermined the efficacy of decision-making. Such that, "confidence in the achievements of political institutions is low" (Knox, 2016: 489). Going back to Aaker's (1997) BPS these enervated political party relations lack 'sincerity' and have resulted in a lack of 'competence' in the body politic. Another major problem in Belfast is the ongoing public displays of ruthless violence linked to the drugs economy. Boland et al (2019) and Hoey (2019) show punishment beatings and killings of alleged drug dealers - the (dis)'empowered youth'? (Belfast City Council, 2017) - by 'dissident' Republicans¹⁴ and Loyalist gangs have escalated dramatically¹⁵. In addition, there has been a spate of high-profile paramilitary assassinations within Republicanism and Loyalism due to internal tensions over control and regulation of drugs spaces. Evidence of this drugs-related 'criminological netherworld' (Topping & Byrne, 2012) "demonstrates that there is a complex bundle of multiple conflicts" (O'Dowd & Komarova, 2013: 535) in Belfast.

Collectively, the above incidents arguably cast doubt on the 'authenticity' (after Zenker, 2018) of Belfast City Council's brand values and personality traits: *ambitious* (i.e. 'we want the best for Belfast and each other'), *imagination* (i.e. 'we imagined a city at peace') and *self-belief* (i.e. 'we can achieve what we wish for' irrespective of barriers). Indeed, the local authority is concerned that such negativity may threaten future progress on tourism. Read in theoretical terms, will violent and disorderly incidents damage Belfast's safe destination personality:

"Belfast's new image as a major tourism city recommended in every guide must be maintained and confirmed. Incidents of unrest or violence that undermine this hard-won image could do enormous damage to the attractiveness of the city as a major tourism destination" (Belfast City Council, 2010: 7).

Interestingly, when pressed on whether ongoing tensions undermine the legitimacy of Belfast's 'brand-wagon' respondents offered these insights. Respondent C felt such events do not damage the integrity of

¹³ A Public Inquiry was created to examine the Renewable Heat Incentive. This green energy scheme has incurred escalating costs totalling £700 million; furthermore, over the next 20 years £1 billion of public money is due to be paid from public funds. Sinn Féin blame the First Minister Arlene Foster who was Minister for Enterprise at the time of the scheme and called for her resignation. She refused and this disagreement led to the collapse of the institutions with each party blaming the other.

¹⁴ Such as Direct Action Against Drugs in Belfast and Republican Action Against Drugs in Derry; epitomising what Topping & Byrne (2012) term 'policing entrepreneurs'.

¹⁵ During 2016-7 there were 94 casualties from shootings and assaults linked to Republicans and Loyalists, this represented a 30% increase on 2015-6 (Boland et al, 2019).

the branding campaign, along with a suggestion that the Belfast brand personality can transcend the politics of division:

“No, I don’t think it undermines that. I’ll say this again, the brand is not there to service and resolve all of our political problems. Absolutely not, but I’ll go back to the Belfast Agenda. And what the Belfast Agenda looked at, it looked at the issues that Belfast has on unemployment, deprivation, homelessness, drugs in certain areas of Belfast... So like our City and Neighbourhood Services Department works so closely with the PSNI on things like those key issues... So making Belfast an inclusive city for all... because it shouldn’t just be about Green and Orange... The Belfast Agenda recognises Belfast has issues like any other city as well as our troubled past and how we address our troubled past... It’s just installing that sense of pride. And for me, what I mean in the back of our heads we never wanted the brand to replace community flags. That wasn’t an objective, but what we did want was to people to have that sense of pride in Belfast and absolutely having a brand that isn’t political. It is about Belfast, the spirit of Belfast in the personality of Belfast” (Interview July 2020).

Respondent B stressed the huge progress that has been made in Belfast means external audiences view ‘one off events’ less disturbingly than in the past:

“The tensions are very much there. Of course, with branding, you’re always trying to put your best foot forward... But you know what, we are far from perfect... We still have that there is very much Ying and Yang... We’re not perfect, but where we are so much better than we were, and we have a great offering for the world... You know, every time something negative happens I think that audiences are more nuanced than that. I think that they can realise that, well, that’s a one-off event or political thing... Of course, you know, Belfast, you got 300,000 people. All their own opinions and ideas, so it’s really hard for a city to communicate a consistent brand personality. It’s just almost impossible... Yes, there’s split communities. There’s various demographics. There’s different classes. There’s all sorts of things in Belfast, but you know what we’ve had enough of hiding our light under a bushel. We want to be more looking more entrepreneurial, more energetic, more progressive” (Interview June 2020).

Reflecting beyond Belfast to the criticism levied at the theory and practice of city branding, Respondent A suggested that branding requires a rebranding:

“I don’t think it’s just academics, by the way, who challenge the concept of branding, and in particular the branding of places. I think, you know you have lots of people in influential roles in places, and there are many of them who don’t get it. You know whether they’re planners, whether they’re economic development specialists, politicians in some cases. I think it’s for two reasons. First of all is, I think branding itself has got a bad name. I think branding needs a rebrand particularly when it comes to places... I think it’s very understandable that people have a kind of scepticism, if you like, around what branding can do. But if you were to talk to, let’s say a politician and the politician said, you know, we right, we need to write a new story for Pittsburgh or Birmingham or whatever. You know, we need to get a consistent narrative. We need to tell people what we’re about. And all of these things people would nod their heads and go yeah, we do. We need that but if you use the brand word immediately, people go ‘you know that’s superficial’ and all the rest of it. And sure, wherever possible the solutions are not superficial. They’re not artificial” (Interview July 2020).

Answering research question #2 we have demonstrated an obvious tension between Belfast’s new brand personality and everyday lived realities. Undeniably, there has been a significant shift in Belfast’s place imagery. Notwithstanding this, the incidents we have covered above show that Northern Ireland - with Belfast at its capital city and window to the world - “is still troubled by its image following 35 years of civil conflict” (Gould, 2012: 325). The periodic resurfacing of contestation linked to a traumatic past, along with other forms of division and new arenas of violence, jar with the personality of a ‘confident’ and ‘energised’ city (for other studies of image-reality jarring see Baker, 2020; Neill, 2006, 2011; Ramsey et al, 2019).

Conclusions

We have examined how a previously conflict-ridden city has reimagined and reimagined itself using the tools and techniques of city branding - from a ‘pariah city’ to a ‘post-conflict city’ and, most recently, an ‘energised’ and ‘confident’ city. Additionally, our evidence shows how underlying internal ‘conflicts’ (after Zenker, 2018) can undermine an otherwise progressive engagement with brand personality and destination branding. In so doing, we respond to calls for future research to combine *both* positive and negative dimensions of city imagery and brand personality (e.g. Amatyakul & Polyorat, 2016; Davies et al, 2001; Kaplan et al, 2010). Our article demonstrates that despite significant progress on image change there remain significant challenges for city leaders as divisions and tensions connected to Belfast’s contested past periodically resurface. Progress has been made on the city’s brand identity and destination personality; however, there is always the likelihood of regression on brand image with ongoing issues related to a

troubled history. In this sense, and linking to the literature, Belfast is an exemplar of how the ‘complexity of place’ can compromise the construction and maintenance of a ‘stable image’ (after Vinyals-Mirabent et al, 2019). Today, Belfast is a complicated mixture of brand personalities: positive brand identity and destination personality, while the realities of a negative brand image remain problematic. Further evidence of Brown et al’s (2013a) interpretation of Belfast as a ‘bipolar city’.

In conclusion, this article has analysed city branding through the lens of a unique spatial setting. Beyond Belfast, this study offers new insights into how we can understand the drivers, dynamics, tensions, and challenges of image change and brand personality. In this sense, we offer a novel contribution to knowledge. More specifically, the two research questions that underpin this article address some limitations in the literature: firstly, on the *transition* from negative to positive place imagery; and secondly, the *tensions* between historical and contemporary place imagery and associated brand personality traits. In this regard, we move the literature on, beyond the rather fixed analyses of brand personality (i.e. at a point in time), towards an extended and more nuanced temporal understanding. These new insights help to develop the extant literature and broaden our understanding beyond the mere co-existence of positive and negative personality traits. Given this novelty and new understandings, we have paved the way and lay the foundations for further research on the temporal dimensions of brand personality, and the important relationships between past and present that shape the effectiveness of a city’s engagement with image improvement. Ultimately, our findings on the Belfast ‘brandwagon’ offer a framework for understanding other cities around the world.

Conflict of Interest

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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