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Research Article

## Examining the Success of the European Capital of Culture in Sustaining the Cultural Foundations of the European Identity: An Analysis of Media Representations and Journalists' Views on Liverpool 2008

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## Abstract

This article examines the European Capital of Culture programme in relation to its success in sustaining a sense of European cultural identity. This is done by examining the case study of Liverpool 2008. The study is conducted by combining a discourse analysis of a sample of articles of four British newspapers (two regional newspapers and two national newspapers) published in 2008 with interviews conducted with eight journalists in 2012. This research argues that the European Capital of Culture programme is a way in which a city can adopt a sustainable European cultural identity. There are a number of cultural factors that lead to this; some of the most prominent include visual discourse, the degree to which the community embraces the programme, the creation of desirable venues and the adoption of long-term cultural activities, festivals and schools. The analysis underlines that the city of Liverpool still adopts a cultural identity closely associated with the EU programme.

## Keywords

European Identity; European Capital of Culture; Liverpool 2008; Social Constructivism; European Cultural Policy

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*No culture can live, if it attempts to be exclusive*

This famous quote from Mahatma Gandhi (2008: 173) typifies the way in which European cultural policy has been implemented as a means of developing a European identity. Under the banner of 'unity in diversity', the European Union (EU) has attempted to nurture the individual cultures of member states while simultaneously fostering a common European culture. Running concordantly with this theme, this study will investigate the sustainability of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) as a cultural programme in fostering a European dimension and, ultimately, a sense of European cultural identity. This will be achieved by examining the case of Liverpool 2008. We argue that this represents a key case study worth looking at because the initiative gave the opportunity to pave the way for an image shift of the city during the set of events that took place. Looking into a medium term perspective and understanding whether this endeavour was successful beyond the year in which it took place is key in order to provide insights regarding the actual value and importance of ECoC as a policy programme. Besides, through this small case study, we aim at providing insights relative to the issue regarding the local-supranational relationship, hoping that this will furnish insights for future research of a similar kind.

It is worth remembering here that the ECoC has become a way in which cities can 'stimulate urban regeneration, city branding and economic development' as well as contributing directly to the debate surrounding a 'European cultural identity' (Boland 2010: 627). The ECoC is a cultural policy through which it is hoped can be achieved the European Commission's aim for European cultural policy, i.e. bringing the common cultural heritage to the fore even while respecting member states' national and regional diversity. This approach to achieving a European cultural identity has been termed by the EU 'unity in diversity' (Delanty and Rumford 2005; Pantel 1999). While there have been studies which investigate the extent to which the ECoC, and the example of Liverpool in particular, adopted a sense of European cultural identity, these studies have investigated the topic during the year a city was awarded the title. Consequently, evidence of the success of cultural policy in developing a European cultural identity has been situated in a very narrow temporal frame. In order to address this gap in the literature, this study analyses local and national newspaper articles

during 2008 in order to gauge media perceptions of Liverpool's cultural identity during its reign as ECoC. A number of journalists writing at the time have since been interviewed, in order to evaluate the perception of the ECoC as a policy which achieves the EU's aim of bringing a common cultural heritage to the fore. The research question of this study is therefore: is the ECoC a programme which helps to create a medium-term and sustainable European cultural identity? The first section provides an overview of the theoretical and methodological insights regarding the study of the European identity through social constructivist lenses. We then outline the main academic discussion regarding the EU's cultural policy, with a more specific focus on the event 'European Capital of Culture'. After that, we introduce briefly our methodological design before reporting some of the main findings emerging from our analysis in the final section.

## **SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM AND THE STUDY OF EUROPEAN IDENTITY**

The theoretical and methodological background of this article follows the social constructivist insights that have been driving the theoretical discussions surrounding EU studies and the cultural dimension of European integration since the late 1990s. Social constructivism emphasises the discursive challenges generated by the European integration project, as well as the communicative practices developed through processes of social interaction and socialisation happening in the public sphere. This particular aspect of social constructivism has been extensively explored by a number of scholars (Checkel and Katzenstein 2009; Christiansen, Jorgensen and Wiener 1999; Diez 2001). This agenda highlights that Europe is not a bargaining arena among states asserting their power and interests but can be discursively impacted by the socially constructed nature of the environment of which actors are a product. It has thus been established that communication, discourse, norms, structure and agency make up the core elements of social constructivist theorising. Our choice to focus on a discourse analysis of newspaper articles and then to carry out a number of interviews with journalists to examine their perceptions of the event is in line with this agenda. The scope of our work extends to unpacking the core issues, themes, and points of view that surround the construction of meaning around Liverpool 2008.

It is in relation to the concept of European identity that social constructivism has, arguably, made the biggest impact. It has become well established that in order to form a legitimate cultural polity, some form of identification must be sustained (Cederman 2001; Checkel 1999; Checkel and Katzenstein 2009). One of the most important points that constructivist literature has raised is the issue of exclusivity in relation to identity. For many who challenge the concept of a European identity, the allegiance to a nation presents obstacles in the building of opportunities for a European identity to be adopted. Grimm adheres to this view, claiming that the elements missing from a European identity consist of, 'the popular legitimation of the legal act constituting the Union, and the associated self-determination of Union citizens as to the form and content of their political unity' (Grimm 2000: 256). However, this has been challenged through social constructivist literature which views identity as being encompassing and malleable, in which people hold multiple layers of identification (Risse 2009). The emphasis social constructivism places on the symbiotic existence of both a national and European identity have led to an emphasis on the exploration of culture as a binding element of European identity; or a European cultural identity. The interplay between different layers of identification during Liverpool 2008 is a central element that emerges from our analysis, where we look at the different dimensions that shape meaning on notions such as local identity, national identity and European identity, by focusing specifically on the reciprocal influences between them that emerge from discourse surrounding the cultural event.

During the 1980s, academic literature began to explore identity as being a malleable, socially constructed concept, which brought to the fore the importance of culture in shaping a European identity. This can be placed alongside the promotion of a set of initiatives employed by the EU to

create a sense of commonality and belonging (Bee 2008). The combination of the importance of cultural policy at an EU level and a view of identity as being socially constructed has led to a wealth of literature in the past twenty years (Hedetoft 1994; Laffan 2004; Shore 2000). This is not to say that social constructivism is the only theoretical framework which embraces the idea of culture alongside European identity, one of the clearest examples of this comes from Anthony Smith who approaches the issue of European identity by exploring the concept of nationalism. Smith argues that evidence of a rise in nationalism during an era of increasing globalization provides evidence that 'established cultures are essentially antithetical to the development of a cosmopolitan culture, which poses a problem for European identity' (Smith 1992: 55).

Research into European cultural identity has amassed a wealth of literature and surmounted multiple conflicting and contested theories within the field of European studies. As a means of categorising these divergent claims within the academic world, this study will divide the literature on European cultural identity into three broad camps that can be labelled 'unity', 'diversity' and 'unity in diversity', characterising the principle notion laid down in EU documentation on cultural policy. These categorisations have been used in previous studies by a number of scholars including Sassatelli (2002, 2009) and Lähdesmäki (2010, 2012).

As the categorisation implies, theorists who take a stance that 'unity' has created a European cultural identity focus on how a common past has been structured through different themes, ideas, values and beliefs in order to create a common cultural identity. Sassatelli has pointed to the evidence of literature encompassing a 'European spirit', 'based on the legacy of Hellenic rationality and beauty, Roman law and institutions, and Judaeo-Christian ethics' (Sassatelli 2009: 26). Heller has supported this view of European cultural identity by pointing to periods of history such as the Enlightenment and modernism, 'which brought changes to politics, world views and social circumstances' as a means of generating a European identity (Heller 1992: 16).

In general, the themes that encompass the literature promoting 'unity' as the underlying factor resulting in a European cultural identity tend to focus on the past, united by common values and the intermingling of cultures based on shared beliefs, values and experiences. When such unifying experiences exist there is almost always an oppositional 'other' which is excluded or discriminated against (Colley 1992). This has led to some criticism of the 'unity' position. According to Goody, Europe has 'stolen achievements such as rationality, law and capitalism by painting a false picture of its Other' (Goody 2007: 87). Sassatelli has also highlighted that 'the effects of decolonization, the East-West division of Europe and its slow reunification, globalization and migration, have brought the issue of diversity to the fore' (Sassatelli 2009: 29). It is clear that 'unity' is not without its weaknesses and the next part of this section will discuss the core claims of scholars advocating 'diversity' in European cultural identity.

This approach sees European cultural identity as a pluralist concept, stressing the need to see not one but many different European identities and cultures. The core claim of the 'diversity' approach is that it is not possible to conceive of a pan-European cultural identity as cultural interests and identities are so vast across the EU member states. It has been argued that in its most extreme form the concept of a European cultural identity does the very opposite of what it sets out to achieve and can, in fact, foster exclusion and hatred (Orchard 2002: 430). Orchard ratifies this point by claiming that a definition of citizenship in cultural terms can lead 'immediately to racism and to xenophobia' (2002: 430). This is not to say that the 'diversity' literature does not acknowledge the existence of shared beliefs, ideas and values, these are just not seen as pertaining to a uniquely European identity, rather they can be witnessed on a global level. Delanty has pointed out that a European cultural identity can never transcend the national cultural identity because it lacks a base in popular culture and is fundamentally an 'elitist culture' (Delanty 1995: 96). Delanty has also conflated the nature of European cultural identity with a civic identity, arguing that Europe's nostalgic 'high-

cultured past', has a heavy influence on perceptions of European identity in the present (Delanty 1995: 41). Scholars who have championed the perspective of 'diversity' within European cultural identity have therefore asserted both the essentialist nature of national identity and the belief that a cooperative civic space within cultural diversity can be achieved. Despite the core claims that highlight the weaknesses and exclusivity of cultural identity, there are a number of issues with this approach. The views that emphasise the diverse nature of European culture often promote a more political or civic basis as the formation for a European identity. Habermas echoes these claims by asserting that it is a 'shared political culture', which is central to the creation of European identity (Habermas 1999: 287). This political culture is based around a democratic identity in Europe founded on shared norms of legal procedures (Habermas 2005: 29).

Problems arise through the contested nature of the diversity stance. As has been discussed, many scholars see national identity as the archetype for creating a cultural identity, however it is also argued, as the work of Habermas (1999, 2005) shows, that this can be constructed through a shared political culture. Literature asserting diversity within European cultural identity can therefore be argued to have a contradictory nature at its core. Assertions of both essential claims of national identity, the belief in a co-operative civic space, and an often heavy focus on the political demonstrate some of the weaknesses of this approach, weaknesses that the concept of 'unity in diversity' has attempted to solve.

The 'unity in diversity' stance has primarily been explored by Sassatelli and is a relatively new concept in relation to the previous two explored in this section, subsequently substantially less literature has been produced on this topic. However, the extensive work of Sassatelli (Sassatelli 2002, 2007, 2008, 2009) has propelled the concept to the fore of studies relating to European cultural identity. She argues that both 'unity' and 'diversity' are promoted as being the key features of European cultural identity. As Lähdesmäki explains, europeanness is seen to be 'characterized by the plurality of different cultural units and features, but these cultures are also believed to be connected with some underlying common elements' (Lähdesmäki 2012: 63). Nowhere can this stance be seen more clearly than in the rhetoric of the EU itself, the official motto of the EU, 'united in diversity', demonstrates the importance that is placed on the notion of inclusion through the celebration of difference. This focus has been especially placed within the realm of culture; examples can be seen through the poster for 'Europe Day', which in 2004 displayed a Matisse style image in order to convey a shared sense of common artistic culture within Europe. Sassatelli has also been one of the main scholars to draw attentions to the limitations and critiques of unity in diversity, claiming that 'unity in diversity is viewed not only as a formal solution with no substance, a superficial if successful slogan, but also as containing, if anything, a thinly veiled renewed Eurocentric triumphalism' (Sassatelli 2009: 36). This critique is based on the assumption that if multiple identities exist this may lead to a hierarchy of allegiances, in which Europeanness would be seen as progressive and more advanced than the others. Despite these critiques, the EU has stressed the importance of adopting the position of unity in diversity, which stresses the cosmopolitan aspect of European identity, promoting the idea of a common cultural heritage at its roots.

## **THE CULTURAL POLICY OF THE EU AND 'EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE': INSIGHTS ON PREVIOUS FINDINGS**

This section explores the cultural policy of the EU and previous academic findings on the capital of culture. Cultural policy can be seen as being a relatively new area of competence (Banus 2002). Despite this relative infancy in any prominence in EU policy, it has steadily received increasing attention in terms of legislation and initiatives. With regards to official documentation, culture was given its own place in the 1992 Treaty establishing the EU (TEU), making it a recognised aim of EU action, with a legal basis. The Commission became influential in propelling the first cultural

programmes such as Kaleidoscope, Ariane and Raphael, which ran from 1996-1999. Since this accession, cultural policy has initiated a wealth of programmes and actions including the Culture Programme, European Capital of Culture, EU Culture Prizes and European Heritage Days. The main body of EU institutions have recognised the importance of cultural policy as a means of social inclusion and cohesion. This can be shown through the Commission's increasing role in promoting culture as lying at the heart of the European integration project. It is clear that cultural policy has been perceived as being increasingly integral to the functioning of the EU and the development in the European social dimension and has continued to play more of a role in the EU consciousness through legislation and rhetoric in Treaties.

Official documentation suggests that a clear link pertains between culture and identity in the EU, coinciding with the rise of cultural policy. This has been expressed by the European Parliament who stated that 'the concept of European citizenship and identity is linked to an awareness of cultural interdependence' (in Banus 2002: 159). Thus, there has been a distinct change in rhetoric in official documentation from the word 'integration' to 'identity', signalling the acknowledgement of the importance cultural policy has in creating a sense of European identity (Sassatelli 2009: 41). One of the most important rhetorical indicators as to the evolving importance of both culture and identity in the EU consciousness is the adopted official motto of 'unity in diversity'. The changes in discourse throughout the history of cultural policy provide a contextual account of how the concepts of European identity and culture have become intrinsically linked and intertwined over time. It is this focus on European identity, and specifically a European cultural identity, that pushed forth programmes like that of the European Capital of Culture.

Since the ECoC programme started in 1985, there have been numerous academic studies focussing on a variety of different aspects and effects the programme has on cities. This section will be dedicated to exploring thematically the different attributions academics have placed upon the effects the ECoC has on a city's regeneration (urban, economical and cultural) and on its cultural identity. Herrero showed the economic impact the programme had on Salamanca in 2002 and argued that 'cultural tourism can be a factor for richness and therefore economic development and can also be a boost to the urban regeneration of cities' (Herrero et al. 2006: 52). This argument has been supported by Richards who claims that the steady increase in popularity of ECoC to the extent that 'bids to stage the event have taken on the same kind of competitive element only usually seen at the Olympic Games nomination' can be attributed to a 'shifting policy emphasis of the Cultural Capital away from cultural towards economic and urban regeneration goals' (Richards 2000: 159-160). Studies on the ECoC have transcended the economic and focussed also on the political, as can be seen in Hitters's study on the political construction of a European cultural capital which, through the example of Rotterdam in 2001, argued that cultural policies are often used to solve urban problems which are not related to culture (Hitters 2000: 184).

Another element that has been investigated is the use of visual discourse in providing 'cross-cultural communicative power' (Aiello and Thurlow 2006: 159). This has been seen as a major asset of the ECoC in shaping a common cultural identity. Aiello and Thurlow found that throughout promotional visual material in over 30 ECoC campaigns, the 'perceptual, denotative and iconic availability/accessibility of much visual discourse can render it a powerful mediating interface between linguaculture and material culture' (2006: 159). This is a stance which has been concurrently adapted by Heikkinen who, instead of arguing that visual imagery in the city promotes a common cultural identity, argued that the status of being ECoC transforms the 'place-image' perception of a city, which transforms its cultural identity attracting regeneration and investment (Heikkinen 2000: 216). The stimulus used throughout the visual promotional material as well as the visual regeneration of the city is certainly a key way in which the ECoC can promote and convey a sense of European culture, and therefore a cultural identity. This is an element that clearly emerges from our analysis as well which shows, as we discuss further in the last part of this article, the

centrality occupied by the visual image and perception of Liverpool (in short the rebranding of the city) within the national, European and more broadly speaking global contexts both within the media discourse and the points of view of the interviewees.

Despite the acknowledgement that visual discourse plays an immediate and undeniable role in the ECoC and its promotion of a European cultural identity, some literature has instead focused primarily on the way in which the ECoC looks to bring together diverse cultures in order to foster a sense of cultural identity. Lähdesmäki sees the ECoC as a 'cultural meeting place', claiming that, in the cases examined of Pécs, Tallinn and Turku, 'all of the cities stress their location as a historical meeting place of different ethnicities and cultures' (Lähdesmäki 2010: 44). This emphasis would certainly complement the EU's promotion of 'unity in diversity', and stresses a far less immediate impact than that of visual discourse, instead suggesting that it is through the meeting and experience of different cultures within a ECoC city that a cultural identity is conceived. When viewing the ECoC as a cultural meeting place, certain discourses are obviously going to be of influence, and this particular strand of literature has placed emphasis on the role of language and linguistic choices as a means of constructing a reality; in this case European cultural identity. This point has been conveyed by Griffiths who looked at the discourses used in ECoC cities and mentioned, in the case of Liverpool, that the language used in order to convey a cultural distinctiveness is that of 'a city that is marginalized, unorthodox, resilient and combative, and for this reason able to reflect and speak to the experiences of other stressed areas in Europe and the wider world' (Griffiths 2006: 424).

It is clear that the literature on the relationship between the ECoC programme and European cultural identity is diverse in its attribution of factors ranging from visual discourse, place-image perceptions, cultural diversity and linguistic discourse. However, it is important to stress that not all studies have embraced the idea that the ECoC promotes a European cultural identity. One of the main criticisms is the underrepresentation of minorities in the discourse of the ECoC programme (Lähdesmäki 2010: 38).

The underrepresentation of specific areas of culture is one of the focal points within studies of the ECoC and resonates within the studies that have been conducted on Liverpool in particular. The aforementioned criticism in fact relates to specific areas of Liverpool's culture which, it is argued, were neglected by the ECoC programme. Boland has asserted that Liverpool 2008 marginalised large sections of the poorer elements of society and only really promoted a new European cultural identity in the city centre, ignoring the more negative parts of Liverpool's culture including the 'gang culture' (Boland 2010: 638). Although there are very few studies that exist on the relationship between European cultural identity and Liverpool as a case study, the studies that do exist appear to echo the wider themes explored above. Studies that promote the sense of European cultural identity within Liverpool focus on the strong sense of community spirit which was felt in embracing the European elements of the city, seen in the adoption of the slogan 'The World in One City' and also highlight the visual changes in architecture and festivals throughout the city which altered its cultural identity (Jones and Wilks-Heeg 2004: 342).

Whether focusing on the apparent promotion or hindrance that the ECoC has on creating a European cultural identity within a city, there seems to be one underlying undercurrent which runs through all of these studies; the fact that they all focus on events and changes which occur during the year the city was awarded the title. In our study, we focus instead on the sustainability of the programme. This is achieved by exploring the media discourse at regional and national level regarding Liverpool's year as ECoC in 2008 and comparing them with interviews conducted with journalists from the regional and national press by asking them if the views they portrayed of the city's cultural identity in 2008 remain the same four years later.

## METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN

In our research we followed a qualitative approach based on two levels of analysis: a discourse analysis of newspaper articles written in both local and national newspapers during 2008 to determine the core themes and topics that emerged during the course of the event; a set of interviews with a number of journalists writing for such newspapers four years after Liverpool's tenure, to determine whether the media discourse surrounding ECoC as a cultural programme was sustained or whether it was only short-lived or experienced during its reign. The relevance of our analysis lies in the fact that we look for aspects of change and continuity in the media discourse in order to provide an evaluation of the aims of the ECoC policy programme.

Discourse analysis has become a staple tool within investigations into various areas of political science and helps to provide some unique and enlightening ways of carrying out research. It must primarily be acknowledged that discourse is a highly contested term and, malleable and fluid, evolving through the literature that has been written (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999; Fairclough 1995; Hayer 2002; Laffey and Weldes 2004; Wæver 2004). One of the main areas discourse analysis has proved its strength as a methodological research technique is within studies on the EU (Bee and Guerrina 2014; Carta and Morin 2014; Howarth and Torfing 2005) and more specifically on studies of European identity (Carta and Wodak 2015; Hülse 2006; Krzyzanowski 2010). It is therefore perfectly placed to aid the nature of this research

The use of discourse analysis as an analytical tool is consistent with the theoretical standpoint of social constructivism and the overarching focus on structure in meaning complements the focus of our study. More specifically, in our study discourse analysis was used to examine newspaper articles in 2008 in order to gauge the perceptions of a European cultural identity.<sup>1</sup> In order to extract specific viewpoints on perceptions of cultural identity within Liverpool through articles written in 2008, the data have been categorised via the creation of a codebook developed through an open coding process (Charmaz 2007). This helped to address and minimise researcher bias which helped in creating a fair and unbiased set of codes on which to build the data analysis, enhancing the potential for a greater substantive amount of detail. This study employed line-by-line coding to a sample of one hundred random articles; taking twenty-five from each newspaper chosen. The coding process looked for themes relating to adopting a sense of European cultural identity, which ranges from the cultural activities structured throughout the year as well as themes of feelings within the community and the portrayal of events and attitudes. Whilst looking at the European Dimension, the codes were also based around a portrayal of local, civic and national dimensions within the media to distinguish perceptions of the ECoC as adopting European cultural identity or a sense that the event was perceived as displaying a more local or national cultural identity, or indeed a more general absence of association with the European element of the programme.

The second stage of the research regarded the execution of a number of semi structured interviews with journalists involved with reporting upon Liverpool 2008. The implementation of this technique in our study was seen as an essential research component as well as a complementary tool to use alongside discourse analysis as a means of uncovering the findings of the research. Due to the nature of the research, much of the focus of each interview was centred around the central themes emerging from the analysis of the media articles and which either suggested evidence of, or a lack of, European cultural identity within Liverpool. More specifically, the questions asked in the first part of the interview aimed to tease out the main themes which the interviewees perceived and experienced during Liverpool's reign as ECoC before asking questions which directly related to the core themes that emerged from the analysis of the media. These themes ranged from cultural changes within the city, media perception of the programme, inclusionary and exclusionary aspects of culture and perceptions of citizens/community involvement. Although some questions do refer to the European element of the cultural programme, the interviews were designed so that the

questions did not lead respondents to focus on the European element in particular, rather to divulge the themes that they felt were present at the time. In order to achieve the prevailing aim of maintaining the structure of the qualitative interview, and in order to minimise the use of leading questions, we approached the interviews thematically, asking diverse questions on the nature of cultural identity. The second part of the interview was personalised to the interviewee and the themes they personally thought were prominent in 2008. This part of the interview was designed in order to uncover how strongly each participant focussed on the European element of Liverpool's cultural identity during 2008 in order to see whether they still perceived this aspect to be consistent in 2012. Questions ranged from themes that included visual culture, popular, high and low culture, festivals, perceptions, community and citizenship. By exploring specific issues relating to Liverpool's cultural identity, we established whether perceptions surrounding the city's cultural identity had changed after the reign of ECoC. This then led to an assertion as to whether the ECoC succeeded in achieving the EU's aim of a long term or sustainable European cultural identity or whether successes were short lived, extending only to the year the title was awarded. The interview process was, therefore, designed and based around previous research within this study, aiming to tease out some of the themes of European cultural identity explored in previous works on the ECoC, as well as deviating from these works by looking at the issue of sustainability.

### **LIVERPOOL 2008 AND THE CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE EUROPEAN IDENTITY: A SUSTAINABLE PROJECT?**

There were a number of themes which became prominent throughout our analysis. Consistently recurring themes were those of visual discourse, festival and cultural events, changing perceptions of Liverpool and the community within Liverpool, all factors which evidenced a European cultural identity during the events that took place in 2008. The proportion of articles within each newspaper that reported on Liverpool's inclusion of European elements of culture in a positive light drastically outweighed negative reports or those which excluded a European association. The themes which were espoused ranged vastly and no one single theme could be pin pointed as being distinctly dominant over the others throughout the year. One point which must be acknowledged which was extremely evident was the lack of popular culture associated with a European element, instead, there was a heavy focus on high culture such as theatre production. This could lead to the assumption that large areas of people were excluded from this experience. However, the dominant focus on festivals, street parades, and events which were available and free to everyone, and the focus on Liverpool's community adoption of a European culture led to the conclusion that, throughout the discourse of the media, there was evidence of articles which raised discussions pertaining to the link between Liverpool and the European cultural identity. Although there were some contradictions, the interviews largely reiterate this trend.

#### ***The Interplay between Regional and European Culture***

Our analysis of the 2008 media sample shows evidence of a clear link between the experience of Liverpool as host of the ECoC and a wider transnational European dimension, shaped by a discourse that combines the city's regional culture with a wider European one. This certainly shows that firstly, newspapers were engaging in the idea of Liverpool as a European city and displaying a European cultural identity and secondly, that this was being displayed through 'unity in diversity', the third central stance on the literature on European identity that we discussed before. The main themes that were associated with a European cultural identity in the discourse of newspapers were the visual perception of the city and the cultural events, and the festivals and productions that were put in place. This is evident through displays of Liverpool's cultural identity and incorporating various companies, directors and ideas from around the continent to bring forth the common elements in

European culture whilst still maintaining the individuality of Liverpool's regional culture. In one of the many articles published right at the beginning of January 2008, and celebrating the start of the events, a core discussion related to the distinctive features of Liverpool but set within a broader, British, European, and global culture. Liverpool was presented as 'the ideal and intimate stage for a big show' and 'a visitor-friendly thoroughly engaging large-scale village', compared to any other British town, and London in particular. The capital was negatively labelled as 'a series of disparate districts connected by Tube' (LDE 1/01/08). Under these circumstances, Liverpool was assuming the role of being the showcase of the British identity to a wider arena: 'It falls to Liverpool to single-handedly represent the entire UK on a pan-European and global stage' (LDE 1/01/08). This was a thought widely remarked upon by the media throughout the celebrations and events that took place in 2008, with the wider perception that the Cultural Programme was shaping the city's image at the national, but also transnational level: 'Liverpool's place on the national and international stage is being cemented by the phenomenal success of its theatres, galleries and museums this year' (DP 2/7/08).

The visual perception of Liverpool is a topic that we discuss in more detail below. It is worth, however, highlighting the emphasis on the cultural drivers that establish the regeneration of the image of the city. The accession of a European dimension within Liverpool through a strong regional culture was certainly a theme shared in both regional and national newspapers. This theme was strongly identified through events which incorporated parts of the city associated with Liverpool's regional history and culture. ECoC is mirrored as a key opportunity in this sense, as the following extract explains: 'Liverpool can become a major European player as a result of 2008. It would have taken a lot longer had it not been for Capital of Culture' (DP 2/7/08). A meaningful example that can be drawn in this regard refers to the 'Tall Ships races' that was reported by the media as being one of the major cultural events that took place in the summer of 2008 along the historic Mersey river, a cultural icon and firmly part of the regional identity of Liverpool. The 'Tall Ships races' were widely discussed in the newspapers as a key element of the Liverpool 2008 branding and central in the image construction of the city. Liverpool had been chosen from more than a dozen European ports to host the race and locally was reported as a way to bring to the fore an important symbolic element of the city history, its 'maritime heritage' (LDE 27/09/07). Judith Feather, head of events for Culture Company, in discussing the 'Tall Ships' with a journalist of the Liverpool Echo, argued that: 'Their arrival on the Mersey will be an incredible sight and easily one of the defining images of our Capital of Culture year' (LDE 18/08/08). The event was depicted in the local media as an important opportunity to portray the city as belonging to a wider transnational space formed with other European cities:

The magnificent spectacle will attract hundreds of thousands of spectators in what is set to be a highlight of Capital of Culture year. Liverpool was chosen from more than a dozen major European ports to host the start of the race, which also takes in Norway before ending in the Netherlands (LDE 3/1/08).

The overall discussion reveals a key insight within the overall debate. The symbolism represented by Liverpool's events is deeply rooted within historical and regionally significant areas of the city such as the Mersey River, helping to marry the regional with the European cultural dimension. This link also emerged during the interviews conducted in 2012, and shows the demand for more European cultural events from within the city. When asked to reflect on the success of the productions and festivals of the ECoC year and how that reflects on the city today, all participants claimed there was a noticeable effect within the city.

A meaningful example of this is represented by the following extract taken from an interview with a journalist of a local newspaper:

Since 2008 there has been an appetite for that kind of culture, we saw last year Viva Voce come back to the city merely through popular demand, from the amount of tickets sold. No, there is no sign of the desire for this kind of culture stopping (Interview 1, LDE).

The positive impact of Liverpool 2008 in bringing a change in the cultural capital of the city is corroborated by another journalist in the following extract:

those positive reviews I made in 2008 I will be making next week, we see these types of productions and street parties recurring in Liverpool and teams from all over Europe are still attracted to Liverpool, I don't think that would have happened if it were not for the Capital of Culture year (Interview 3, DP).

In our sample, there is a positive response to the idea that the ECoC has been a sustainable way of fostering Liverpool symbolic elements within a broader European context. Overall, the interviews with local and national journalists have identified a number of different factors to which this can be attributed. In accordance with the literature presented earlier, there is a consensus that visual discourse plays an undeniable role in leaving a legacy in which people can interact with and be reminded of a European culture or European city, as argued further in a moment. There are also sustainable forms of culture such as schools, classes and productions which have been influenced by Liverpool's year as ECoC. One of the most important points to note is that any negative statements made originally regarding Liverpool and its perception as a European city were dispelled and replaced by positive reinforcement and affirmation that today Liverpool displays a cultural identity closely linked to Europe.

### *Perceptions of Liverpool and Cultural Changes*

One of the most prominent themes, which dominated national newspapers, was the change in perceptions of Liverpool as a city and the reversal of negative stereotypes to positive. This is a dominant discussion within the sample of articles that we collected and focuses on the process of reconstruction of Liverpool's image because of cultural policy and more specifically because of the ECoC. A meaningful example of this is found in the following extract, which provides emphasis of the high expectations embedded at the start of the events:

Without doubt, this year will change Liverpool for ever. Apart from the physical fabric of the city, the coming 12 months will alter the perceptions of our people, as well as those who visit and share in their experience. Overground, underground and high in the sky, Liverpool is being reinvented, providing a time for reflection as well as anticipation. Liverpool's hour to redefine itself has finally come, both in terms of the image it transmits and the benefits it reaps (LDE 1/1/2008).

The start of a shift in the perception of Liverpool hints at the Capital of Culture programme replacing perceptions of a city afflicted by a huge number of social problems, criminality for example: 'it's no secret that Liverpool has had a bad name in the past – that's starting to be put behind us' (DP 19/03/08). The rebranding of Liverpool, the changes in perceptions and the removal of negative stereotypes was a main theme noted in local press:

It is impossible to pass through Liverpool today and deny it has not been transformed beyond the wildest dreams of even recent years, when a walk across an often deserted town at night was as unpleasant and potentially dangerous as taking the Road to Jericho. The finest strategy of our Capital of Culture plan was to have five themed run-up years, creating a profile which encouraged people to come and live and invest here. The improved city would never have happened on such a scale without the impetus of 2008 (LDE 1/7/08).

Differing perceptions of the city were clearly a focal point within the discourse of national newspapers as well. However, within the local press the changing perceptions and altered negative stereotypes of those people outside of the city remained a main theme in its discourse, and incorporated the element of European culture to convey this change. The perception in local newspapers was that the majority of criticism at the beginning of the ECoC year came from newspapers, politicians and commentators outside Liverpool. The Liverpool Echo even gave them a specific name during the year, calling them 'misery moos and moaning minnies' (LDE 23/07/08). The negative depiction of Liverpool, however, continued throughout the year and afterwards, as the local press pointed out: 'commentators have cast doubt on whether the city will be able to rise to the challenge, pouring scorn on the notion that Liverpool has a culture worth celebrating' (DP 9/1/09). Questions emerged about the value of cultural activity put in place in Liverpool and about the meaning of culture. The emphasis on the economic functionality played by the events during ECoC, contrasts with the actual meaning of 'culture'. This is a major criticism made by the national media in respect of Liverpool 2008:

As Liverpool 2008 proved, culture can play a lucrative part in the tourist economy. A vibrant culture, however, is one that surprises, cajoles and unsettles even as it entertains, an idea that sits uneasily with those who prefer to sell a culture that is bland, misty-eyed and stuck in the past (G 22/1/09).

This discursive context underlies, in our view, the emergence of a debate at the local level that is focused on countering the negative perceptions of Liverpool generated by the national media. Throughout the programme and because of the high success and attention it received, Liverpool is presented as a showcase for similar events to take place in the UK, but also is taken forward as an example of good practice at the European level: 'Government has taken up the suggestion that one of the legacies of what is, after all, also the UK's Capital of Culture, should be to build on the experience of 2008 and develop a UK Cities of Culture programme' (DP 9/1/09). Besides, the visit to Liverpool of Barroso, President of the European Commission at the time, was portrayed as an event that could foster a new role assumed by the city as a driver of the transnationalisation of cultural activity within Europe:

Liverpool's model for running Capital of Culture could be exported to future hosts. The city's Culture bosses met with the president of the European Commission at a summit at Tate Liverpool yesterday. They discussed how Liverpool could be involved in "knowledge transfer" across the EU after 2008. The city could become part of a network of Capitals of Culture (DP 4/7/08).

This process is fundamental in defining the new centrality acquired by Liverpool in the European scene and proves evidence of the successful endeavour to showcase 'its cultural life on an international stage' (G 8/1/08), through a process of 'cultural renaissance and long-term regeneration projects' (DP 9/1/09).

This dominant theme within the discourse of the press thus indicates the belief that attitudes towards the city were changing nationally and internationally. This was facilitated by the new positioning of Liverpool within a wider and networked European space where knowledge exchange on the cultural programme was pivotal. This is an important theme as it shows not only the acknowledgement within the discourse of local newspapers that Liverpool was seen as a key player for the European dimension but that there was a belief this was being adopted on a larger scale beyond the city: 'We have built up very sophisticated international networks, and delegates from the city are being asked to attend major conferences around Europe to talk about our experience as Capital of Culture' (DP 30/06/09).

The perception of Liverpool as existing on a local, national and European scale was a recurrent theme within the interviews conducted with the journalists in 2012, closely associated with a theme that arose in the discourse analysis but differing slightly in focus. The results show an overall

recognition of the change that occurred in Liverpool because of the ECoC. It is important to report here the existence of a greater connection between statements journalists made in 2008 and their view of the city's cultural identity when interviewed in 2012. For instance, when asked about a statement that suggested Liverpool might take a brief culture break at the end of the year, one interviewee stated:

Well, I suggested that it might happen because it had been a big year, but no, it didn't really seem to stop. A lot of the connections made with companies and culture production teams throughout the year have been maintained and I look forward to whenever I come to Liverpool to watch shows from the same directors and producers I saw in 2008 (Interview 6, G).

Analysis of the interviews also reveals the way in which the cultural relationships built over 2008 seem to have been sustained across time. It is, however, worth remarking that this overall trend was not completely recognised. A meaningful example of the differences of opinion existing between different interviewees is represented by the following extracts, where, in the first, one journalist stated that today Liverpool remained culturally identified with Europe, and in the other case, a second interviewee conveyed that the perception of European culture in Liverpool had reduced after 2008.

I remember well reporting on how the ECoC had brought the best in Europe's theatre productions to Liverpool and you can see that remain today, I believe the Capital of Culture programme, in Liverpool's case anyway, has been a catalyst to entice directors, producers and actors alike to the city and these types of shows have been coming back ever since. I know it encroaches on the buildings we were just talking about but arenas like The Empire Theatre and The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra keep Liverpool right at the fore of European culture (Interview 7, DM)

There is nowhere near the focus on Liverpool as a European city anymore, when I talked [in 2008] about the importance the community made in bringing a sense of Europe to Liverpool and indeed, Liverpool to Europe, I think it kind of dissipated after the year and moved to the next city. It's a very World Cup feel or what I imagine will happen with the Olympics, everyone gets swept up in European Capital of Culture fever but it's gone fairly soon afterwards (Interview 8, DM).

The statements made by the two journalists therefore provided differing results, both participants strongly felt that the visual impact made by 2008 and the architecture helped promote a sense of European cultural identity, however they were firmly divided on other issues, especially relating to the sustainability of that identity. There is thus a contrast between the feeling of the ECoC developing a legacy in terms of European culture and in particular theatre production in the venues created through 'Liverpool 08', and on the other side the feeling that, instead, the feeling of Liverpool being a European city had diminished since the end of 2008 and that no real legacy had been forged.

### *The Visual Image of Liverpool*

When exploring discourse relating to the visual image of the city, a recurring theme which arose in articles was that of the rejuvenation of Liverpool in the broader European context because of ECoC. In a way, the programme brought to Liverpool a form of cultural recognition and legitimacy that is not acknowledged at the national level:

The city has a better reputation outside the UK than at home. Outside the North West, 80 per cent of Britons have never even been to Liverpool. In my view, four out of five of you are missing a treat. The neo-classical splendour of the place hits you the moment you walk out of Lime Street Station (DM 6/1/08).

The visual image of Liverpool is part of the overall discourse regarding its renewed branding and self-presentation in the international arena: 'there is the feeling of pride that a new-look Liverpool is presenting itself to the world both in terms of its transformed city centre, its revitalised waterfront, and its economic growth' (DP 26/05/08).

Therefore, the rejuvenation of the city ties in with altering negative stereotypes highlighted previously, and a newer, more modern 'European landscape'. In order to look into deeper details regarding the social representations of the journalists, during the interview process we asked our interviewees to identify statements they made in 2008 which in some way related to the cultural identity of the city and then asked if they felt this statement was valid today and if the cultural identity of the city remained the same. When asked about statements journalists made regarding the visual image of the city relating to a European culture or landscape, an overall agreement regarding the shaping of Liverpool as a European city clearly emerged:

I stand by the statement I made in 2008, the rejuvenation of the city has given Liverpool a real modern, European feel and the work to the landscape that was done in 2008 still makes me feel as though I am walking into a European city today (Interview 7, DM).

Oh yes, the visual landscape is still as breath-taking as ever, the arenas host shows that are renowned across Europe and I still feel very much that Liverpool is visually a great European city to visit (Interview 8, DM).

The power to reflect and immediately associate visual discourse and imagery with a shared sense of European cultural identity was mirrored also in interviews with journalists working within the regional press. One of the most important findings, which echoed that of the national journalists, was the view that the visual image of the city was the most important cultural change and related to a European culture. However, this was equalled with the importance that was witnessed within changes in the community. For example, one interviewee from the Liverpool Echo claimed that:

It was Liverpool's landscape which really added to the cultural embrace of the Capital of Culture year. In my opinion there was a perfect balance struck with the old and the new in the city, we saw all those new arenas and theatres hosting events, the opening concert springs to mind. And then you have the history of Liverpool being brought in, lots of those street festivals, like the mechanical spider I was talking about? That was taken near the Mersey River and the Liver building (Interview 1, LDE).

Most participants made a reference to the fact that the visual image and discourses in the city instilled a sense of European cultural identity within Liverpool long after its reign as ECoC. However, there was another important theme associated with the arenas and venues which held certain events, which was how the people impacted upon those visual spaces, showing that visual discourse and the way the people embraced a sense of European culture were the most important factors. This shows that not only was the immediacy of visual stimulus imperative to the adoption of European cultural identity but it was perceived that this translated through to the wider populace, through their interaction with and participation in many of the cultural events. The answers given regarding statements made about visual spaces in Liverpool show the longevity that visual architecture and imagery can have in creating a cultural identity, and in these interviews is certainly asserted the importance that long lasting symbolic places, such as buildings and arenas, can have in successfully sustaining a European cultural identity. During an interview, a journalist claimed that at the start of the ECoC, train stations such as Central and James Street were a 'descent into hell rather than an arrival in the European Capital of Culture'. When asked if this remained his view of the city today he remarked:

I remember writing that and no, far from it, although some areas of the city were fairly deprived, the regeneration of the city on the whole was remarkable and today I can certainly say that Liverpool is a European capital of culture (Interview 2, LDE).

## CONCLUSION

This study addressed whether the ECoC programme can be key in creating a medium term and sustainable European cultural identity, by focusing on Liverpool 2008. We explored this by analysing a number of articles written in 2008, in order to identify key themes, and through a set of semi-structured interviews with journalists to investigate their views of Liverpool's cultural identity four years later.

The results show that there were a number of prominent themes, which led to the sustainability of a European cultural identity in Liverpool. Visual discourse played a pivotal role in first instilling a European dimension in 2008. The way in which the ECoC allows a city to regenerate its landscape and be perceived as 'European' is clearly an image that will last long after its reign as ECoC and therefore is a strong tool through which a European cultural identity can be sustained. All of the journalists interviewed noted a positive link between the visual discourse within the city and a strong sense of European cultural identity in Liverpool four years later.

Another conclusion which can be drawn is that all but one journalist felt that Liverpool remained a European city, in cultural terms, four years after. This suggests there are strong factors within the ECoC which help cities to sustain a European cultural identity. One of the most important of these, highlighted by the local journalists, was the recognition of the European dimension by the wider populace. If the appetite for certain types of culture are evident within a city and are adopted as part of a city's identity after the Capital of Culture year, there are certainly grounds to suggest that these forms of cultural identification will be sustainable. Continuing from this, there is a recurrent association, according to the findings of this study, between perceptions of a city and its cultural identity. Liverpool was perceived, locally, nationally and on a European level to be transformed into a key player in a broader transnational space. Consequently, the perceptions of people in and outside of the city have changed and this has attracted a wealth of cultural programmes, shows and schools which remained within the city in 2012.

This study has thus shown that there are the building blocks for a sustainable European cultural identity through the ECoC programme and that visual discourse, perceptions of a city, and the role of the community play crucial roles in not only creating but sustaining a European culture long after the ECoC title has moved on. Through our analysis, it has been argued that there are a number of important themes highlighted above which were evident in Europe and lead to the assertion that ECoC is one way in which a European cultural identity can be sustained.

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<sup>1</sup> In our sample we included a number of articles published by the following newspapers: Guardian (G), Daily Mail (DM), Daily Post (Mersey edition) (DP), Liverpool Daily Echo (LDE). The interviews were conducted in 2012 with 8 journalists writing with these newspapers. The database was constructed by combining a number of key words that led us to select 100 relevant articles published in the period of 2007-2009. The data analysis was carried out by relying on a code book constructed through an 'open coding' process and the support of atlas.ti.

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