Cultural Contestation and Masquerade Politics: The Challenge of Trying to

Develop a Cultural Event in a Divided City.

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Abstract

Cultural events feature prominently in the economic strategies of many cities. However, culture is open to interpretation and cultural expression can be problematic. This paper examines Saint Patrick's Day celebrations in Belfast and how this event has been the victim of a bitter 'cultural war'. Efforts to reframe the event and make it inclusive have had limited success. Like many other post-conflict countries, culture in Northern Ireland is tied to group identity and cultural expression is bound up with the battle for political legitimacy and state sovereignty. This battle for ownership and cultural supremacy has meant that Belfast has been unable to cash in on its authentic links to Saint Patrick. This is unlikely to change because, despite COVID-19 and the prominence given to event tourism in Belfast's new culture strategy, the zero-sum character of the cultural war in Northern Ireland would suggest group identity will continue to trump the economic argument.

Key Words: Saint Patrick's Day; Belfast, cultural expression; event tourism

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As cities worldwide coalesce around a discourse of growth and economic return, increasing attention has been paid to the tourism potential of cultural events. Promoted as part of a city's cultural offering, cultural events now feature strongly in marketing strategies (Smith, 2016). Duffy & Mair (2015) discuss how cultural events create a product, enliven the destination, animate static attractions and promise a glimpse into the authentic culture of a place. While policy makers and destination marketers across the globe have recognised the value of cultural events as an exploitable economic asset, the task of developing and promoting a cultural event for tourism consumption can be problematic. Many issues have been raised concerning accessibility, interpretation, authenticity and commodification. In a post conflict society these issues can be compounded by the fact that culture is often tied to group identity and cultural expression becomes bound up with contests over political legitimacy and state sovereignty (Nagle, 2014).

Whilst cultural events have received increasing attention from both practitioners and academics, there remains a general lack of empirical research into host cities where culture is divisive and contested. This paper aims to contribute to the discussion with an empirical case study of an event organised in a city characterised by deep societal divisions arising from decades of violence and political unrest. Specifically, it examines Saint Patrick's Day (SPD) celebrations in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and how this event has become embroiled in a bitter 'cultural war' between the two main ethnic communities. Drawing on Ross's (2007) work on cultural contestation this paper will discuss how the efforts made over the last two decades to reframe the event and make it more inclusive have had limited success and how local politicians' refusal to move beyond 'masquerade politics has had a detrimental impact on event tourism.

Literature Review

Over the last thirty years policy makers have been keen to exploit culture and the instrumental value accruable from the expressive industries (Smith, 2012). Culture is perceived to be a significant 'economic resource' which explains why it can be found at the heart of the regeneration strategies of many cities (Stevenson et al., 2010). Boland et al., (2018) refer to the 'curing qualities of culture' as it is used to tackle a range of seemingly intractable socio-economic problems. Other commentators refer to the 'dynamism of culture' (Pratt, 2014), 'lionization of culture' (McGuigan, 2009), 'transformative powers of culture' (Belfiore, 2015) and 'just add culture and stir' (Gibson & Stevenson, 2004) narratives. For Garcia (2004) culture-led regeneration is about using cultural activity as the catalyst and engine for the transformation of a place and one of the main approaches to this has been investment in major cultural events (Crespi-Vallbona & Richards, 2007). Large-scale events, in particular, are perceived as being useful in achieving the three 'Rs' of regeneration, re-imaging and rebranding (Foley et al., 2012). Ormerod & Wood (2020) discuss how cultural events can generate investment and jobs whilst Richards (2017) discusses how cultural events not only make cities more dynamic and liveable places for locals but also make them more appealing to tourists.

The tourism potential of events is now well documented. Quinn (2013), for instance, discusses how a very sizeable literature now conceptualises events and festivals solely or predominantly as tourism entities. Getz & Page (2016), in their most recent review of the event tourism literature, discuss how cultural events can add to destination attractiveness by animating static cultural forms and spectacularising fixed structures. By doing so they heighten the visitor experience, adding new points of interest and new activities, all of which adds to the destination's capacity to attract and hold visitors for longer periods of time. Much has been written about the tourism value of major cultural events such as the Mardi Gras and

the Rio Carnival yet McKercher et al. (2006) suggest small community events are perhaps a more sustainable proposition due to their ability to generate substantial returns on small financial investments.

From a policy perspective, academics have considered how events have been used to offset seasonality and encourage regional spread (Connell et al., 2015; Gibson & Connell, 2012). They also offer attractive possibilities for branding or repositioning a destination in the increasingly competitive international marketplace (Pike & Page, 2014). The case of Edinburgh and its long-standing Edinburgh International Festival is often cited as an excellent example of how events can be effectively leveraged to successfully brand a destination (Quinn, 2013). Less dramatically, events of all descriptions can be used to complement, supplement and re-invigorate a destination's promotional efforts more generally.

By and large, the tenor of the event tourism literature suggests that the event tourism relationship is a mutually beneficial one. However, this is not to say that cultural events are uncontested. Critics have raised concerns over issues such as authenticity, commodification, accessibility and interpretation. The issue of preserving cultural authenticity and local control certainly emerges whenever tourism goals are attached to local and regional events (Matheson et al., 2014). Whilst it is almost fifty years since Greenwood (1972) first drew attention to this issue, research continues to highlight the fact that festivals staged for the benefit of tourists can lose their authenticity when they are distorted in pursuit of tourism goals (Chhabra, 2005; Ferdinand & Williams, 2018). It is unfair to dismiss all manifestations of these of types of events as mere commercial pastiche but the tensions that result when local culture is used as part of tourism promotions are undeniable (Kim, 2015). Another criticism levelled at the organisers of tourism-driven cultural festivals is that they may purposely, or sometimes inadvertently, exclude socio-economic, ethnic or other groups

even when they develop deliberate strategies of social inclusion (Clarke & Jepson, 2011).

Usually these strategies are developed to engage visitors rather than residents thus limiting

the likelihood of inclusivity outcomes (Laing & Mair, 2015). This links to Foley et al.'s

(2012) argument that instead of opening up the city and its civic spaces to a wider section of

the population, cultural events can colonise, mark space and define who belongs and who

does not. In this context, cultural events become politicised and contested sites (Cohen,

1993). Merkel (2014) elaborates on this when she discusses the political nature of events and

how over the last few decades cultural events have become important forums for the

articulation of politics and a vehicle for the exercise of power. She notes how glamorous and

attractive international events, particularly those with extensive media coverage, offer

individuals, groups, institutions and organisations a high-profile stage to communicate their

political messages, express their dissent and frequently serve as platforms for national and

political rivalries.

However, this is not a recent phenomenon and history is littered with examples of

events laden with political meaning and embroiled in struggles for power and political

mastery (Leonard & McKnight, 2015). Citing examples such as the Notting Hill Carnival,

Cohen (1993) refers to this manipulation of the event platform as 'masquerade politics' and

argues that it is common for economic and political struggles to take place in the

form of 'cultural movement'. At a local level cultural events have also provided a space for

collective resistance as local actors have used urban spectacles to sow seeds of dissent, create

breeding grounds for reflexive action and launch radical critiques of class, gender and racial

inequality. This supports Waterman's (1998, p.60) argument that cultural events are never

'impromptu or improvised … they are constructed in specific ways by certain groups to

promote particular ideas and beliefs'. Who controls the narrative and what images are

associated with an event can be a source of intense controversy. This was highlighted by

Nagle (2006) when he discussed how cultural events are often the source of intra community acrimony as ethnic groups battle over who gets to retell the story, and from which position. This raises the thorny issue of interpretation which has been well documented in the general cultural tourism literature but less so in an event context.

According to Ross (2007), a renowned expert in the field of conflict management, cultural interpretation takes on added meaning in divided societies such as those experiencing ethnic conflict. This is because in societies experiencing ethnic conflict culture is often tied to group identity and cultural expressions mark groups as distinct from each other. Citing examples such as Catalonia, the Old City of Jerusalem and post-apartheid South Africa, Ross (2007) discusses how identities are frequently articulated through, and contested around, collective memories and mundane, everyday cultural practices such as parades, flag displays, language, clothing, religious practices and public monuments that symbolically connect the past and present and are visible in a region's symbolic landscape. For Ross (2007, p.88) ritual and cultural symbols such as events can be "psychocultural dramas": 'Practices that represent one group to its members become polarizing when their expression is felt as a threat by a second group, and/or when attempts to limit the practices are perceived as a threat by the group performing them. This exacerbates conflict as opponents frequently operate from such different frames that they misunderstand each other and fail to see how their own actions might contribute to the escalatory spiral'.

This supports Nagle's (2014) argument that the expressive nature of certain rituals such as cultural events makes them the perfect means for reinforcing group identity and boundaries. The following quote from Jasper (1997, p.184) highlights how divisive they can be; 'Ritual binds the participants together and reminds them of their moral commitments, stirs up primary emotions, and reinforces a sense of solidarity within the group'. According to Ross (2007) and Nagle (2014) cultural expressions take on added meaning in divided

societies wherein the struggle for recognition is inextricably bound up with contests over political legitimacy and state sovereignty. Citing examples such as Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lebanon and Northern Ireland, they discuss how there is often a race to declare one's own symbolic capital (language, flags, culture) as the valid currency in the nation-state's constitution. For this particular reason ethnic conflicts often have a zero–sum character which only allows a winner or a loser as both groups' desire for national self-determination cannot be realised.

Although polarisation and escalation around contested cultural expressions are common in ethnic conflict, they are not the only possible outcomes. Groups in conflict can also draw on culture to redefine long-standing conflicts on more constructive directions. Ross (2007, p.31) has outlined how ritual and symbolism, within limits, can be made malleable for different readings. New narratives can be developed 'which do not directly challenge older ones, but which re-frame them in more inclusive terms that de-emphasise the emotional significance of differences between groups and identify shared goals and experiences', such as civic values or a past of coexistence. If we apply Ross's (2007) theory to an event context, event organisers and the relevant stakeholders are required to concentrate their efforts in trying to subtly alter the meaning of the event, paying particular attention to aspects that are aggressively divisive. The aim would be to create a new narrative for a contested event that would soften out-group boundaries, change perceptions and make it less polarising. According to Ross (2007) mutual acknowledgement of each other's perceptions and concerns is central to this process; such acknowledgement is often implicit rather than explicit and may not involve acceptance of the other's point of view. He goes on to discuss how such gestures require at least a modicum of goodwill between the groups but, as illustrated in the following case study of Saint Patrick's Day Celebrations in Belfast, this does not always exist in a post conflict society. Saint Patrick was a Christian with close ties to

both Protestant and Catholic Churches. The authors discuss how, Saint Patrick's Day celebrations should be a common cultural symbol in the divided city of Belfast, but instead has become embroiled in a bitter 'cultural war' between the two main ethnic groups in the city.

Context

Belfast is the capital city of Northern Ireland, the six counties that were partitioned from the rest of the island of Ireland in 1921 and became part of the UK. This partitioning ultimately led to the "troubles" in Northern Ireland between 1968-1998 as the Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist (PUL) community wanted to remain part of the UK whilst Catholic, Republican and Nationalist Community (CRN) wanted independence. During the "troubles" over 3,600 people were killed and Belfast was one of the epicentres of this extreme violence. The peace agreement signed in 1998 (the Good Friday Agreement) set out aspirations for a shared society but twenty years on a legacy of fear, distrust and suspicion remain, and sectarian division continues to characterise parts of the city (Morrow, 2019).

Culture has always been a divisive issue in Northern Ireland, but since the Good Friday Peace Agreement it has taken on added significance. McEvoy (2011) and Nagle (2014) attribute this to the fact that the issue of contentious symbols was not properly addressed in the Agreement. As Brown and MacGinty (2003, p.6) write 'although aware of the sensitivities connected with identity, the Agreement avoided any prescriptive mechanisms to confront partisan identities'. Consequently, since the ceasefire of the 1990s, Northern Ireland's politico-military conflict has morphed into a politico-cultural one. A recent Peace Monitoring Report 2017 discussed the myriad of ways in which Northern Ireland's 'Culture Wars' are fought out in the public sphere, citing examples such as the 'flags protests' (2013) and the political storm caused by the proposed Irish Language Act (2017). In Belfast these culture wars are fought out in physical space through wall murals, flags, banners, curb

painting, spontaneous shrines dedicated to victims of the violence and effigy burnings at bonfires. However, the most controversial and divisive form of cultural expression has been parades. Parading in Northern Ireland has a long history and has been used by both nationalists (CRN) and unionists (PUL) to create a sense of origin and distinctiveness and thus political legitimacy (Nagle, 2006). As a result, there have been numerous examples of parades in Northern Ireland becoming politically charged and a source of sectarian tension (Devine & Quinn, 2019).

Given the exclusive and often sectarian nature of public commemorations in Northern Ireland, policy makers, guided by the Good Friday Agreement (1998) and its principle of 'parity of esteem,' have been under pressure to support and promote events that would unite rather than divide the communities. Belfast City Council has consequently targeted its SPD parade as an event that could mobilise both groups to celebrate together as a common identity. The 17th of March - Saint Patrick's Day - evokes powerful emotions and sentiment among the Irish and their diaspora around the world. Cronin & Adair (2006) discuss how it is the day of the Irish wherever they may be, and, just as importantly whomever they are. In this context, Saint Patrick offers a real possibility for joint celebration in Belfast. The historical narrative of Saint Patrick (much of which is based less than 50 miles from Belfast) coupled with the fact that he was recognised and celebrated by the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches should make Saint Patrick a shared symbol. In practice it is much more complex. While both the CRN and PUL communities recognise the symbol of Saint Patrick, they have also clashed by articulating mutually exclusive identities for the symbol (Cullen, 2011). Indeed, since the eighteenth century, the Catholic and Protestant churches have appropriated Saint Patrick as evidence of the early origins of their respective churches in Ireland. Nagle (2014) discusses how this conflict has had an ethno-national character during the 'troubles'. For Irish nationalists, SPD became a focus for celebrating Irish nationalism

and for hosting political parades. In response, unionists challenged the idea that Saint Patrick was automatically a nationalist symbol by characterising him as a 'prototype Protestant' and staging their SPD parades in outlying towns such as Antrim and Ballymena.

The conflict over the control of Saint Patrick has intensified during the early years of the peace process and has become a symbol of tribal allegiance (Cronin & Adair, 2006). In 1998, the year of the peace agreement, Belfast City Council organised the first major SPD parade in Belfast city centre. For nationalists (CRN), the parade represented the equal recognition of Irish identity in a space where Irish nationalist events had once been banned. A nationalist newspaper commented that the parade participants "were shedding the pages of past wrongs, binning the Belfast of … second-class citizenship' (Nagle 2006, p.38). PUL politicians, alternatively, believed the parade was not sufficiently inclusive and consequently withdrew support for funding. It was not until 2006 that Belfast City Councillors voted in favour of organising another SPD event in its city centre and, even then, it was without the political consent of the PUL parties. The reframed version of the event consisted of a parade and an open-air concert and whilst the emphasis was on fun and frivolity the overriding objective was to make it an inclusive event which could be celebrated by both CRN and PUL communities. At the time it was described by Cronin & Adair (2006) as the biggest single attempt at creating an inclusive SPD in Northern Ireland and since 2006 it has become a permanent fixture on Belfast City Council's events calendar. The aim of this paper, fifteen years later, is twofold. Firstly, it wishes to examine if efforts to reframe the event as common symbol have been successful. And secondly, to discuss if, and how the issues surrounding cultural identity have impacted the tourism potential of this event.

Methodology

Yin (1994) subdivides case studies into single or multiple studies and in this research the authors opted for a single case study for two reasons. Firstly, from an event tourism perspective SPD is a global celebration of Irishness and as the capital city of Northern Ireland one would expect Belfast to be tapping into this lucrative market. Secondly embroiled in a bitter 'Cultural War', Belfast presents a study context characterised by particular political, social and cultural divisions. The authors used a sequential mixed methods design where there were two consecutive phases; quantitative data was collected through a questionnaire targeted at local residents followed by a qualitative phase in the form of focus groups with local residents and in-depth interviews with the event organisers, local politicians and tourism officials. Mixed methods were selected because it allowed the authors to capitalise on the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Leech & Onwuegbuzie ,2010). The questionnaire was a street survey administered by a group of interviewers and therefore was kept short and did not include open ended questions (Durbarry, 2018). To add richness to the quantitative data the authors then conducted focus groups. Whilst they were not targeted at the general public, the interviews also added to the depth of discussion and allowed the author to triangulate the findings (Hay, 2011). It should be noted that given the uniquely contentious environment the authors had to ensure that for each method the sample was not biased towards one community (PUL or CRN) and that the views of all respondents were treated with respect and sensitivity (Boland et al., 2018).

In quantitative research the researcher identifies variables based on the objectives with the purpose of finding out the number of participants that have the same idea or belong to the same group (Saunders, 2016). The focus of this study was on SPD celebrations in Belfast and, in particular, how this event was perceived and supported by the two largest ethnic communities. To accomplish this the authors used a stratified sampling technique. A simple random sample was drawn from each stratum using ethnicity and residency as the

common characteristics. Preliminary questions on residency and ethnicity helped to screen

the respondents and only those living in Belfast and who identified as being from either the

CRN or PUL communities completed the survey. The survey was conducted in the city

centre, a place regarded by both communities as a 'shared space' (Leonard & McKnight

2013, p.402). The designed instrument was a self-completion questionnaire which was

distributed over a two-week period beginning the 18th March 2019. It contained 10 questions

falling into four categories: participation, perception, tourism and profile. Three of these

questions had lists from which the respondent had to choose one answer. A pilot survey with

25 participants took place one month prior to data collection to ensure the content validity of

the questionnaire, the understanding of the questions by participants, the length of the

questionnaire and the sequence of questions. In total 810 questionnaires were completed, and

they were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS).

In Belfast cultural identity is a complex and emotive topic so to add meaning to the

quantitative data the authors organised 9 focus groups with 71 members of the local

community who differed by age, sex, occupation and neighbourhood. Stratified sampling was

also used for the focus groups and, given the segregated nature of housing in the city, the

authors worked with local community officers to recruit an equal number of representatives

from both the CRN and PUL communities.   This proved difficult in a city which is still

segregated in places by peace walls, so the focus groups in East Belfast (PUL) and West

Belfast (CRN) were attended by members of one community only.

Critical case sampling, a form of purposive sampling, was used to select the

interviewees. As Saunders (2016, p.174) notes, 'purposive or judgmental sampling enables

the researchers to use their 'judgement' to select cases that will best enable them to answer

their research question(s) and to meet their objectives'. In total, 16 in-depth interviews were

conducted, and the sample included a former government minister, councillors from the five main political parties who sat on the 'City Growth and Regeneration Committee', council officers from the Events, Tourism and Good Relations Departments at Belfast City Council plus representatives from Beat Carnival, Tourism Ireland, Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau and the Orange Order. To elicit as much information as possible, the authors combined the general interview guide approach with an open-ended approach (Brunt et al, , 2017).   Both the interviews and the focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data was then analysed using thematic analysis which is a process of encoding qualitative information leading to what Mason (2002) refers to as 'data transformation', in which the information is condensed, clustered, sorted and linked. When reporting the findings, emphasis was placed on providing 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 1973, p.34) with quotations from both interviewees and the focus groups used to support the quantitative data.

Results and Discussion

In a divided society such as Northern Ireland there are few symbols and rituals which people in competing groups can share (Ross, 2007). Therefore, with the relaunch of the event in 2006, the Events Department within the Belfast City Council made a concerted effort to promote SPD as a day of joint celebration. To achieve this, it worked closely with their colleagues in the Good Relations Department. The Council also serviced in a private company called Beat Carnival to organise the artistic component of the parade. Its remit included recruiting community groups from the PUL community to participate in the parade. To facilitate this 'creativity' various workshops were organised. Groups that participated in them could apply for a grant of up to £1000 from a SPD fund organised by the Good Relations Department. The operational components of the parade were managed internally by the Events Department. To promote inclusivity, it required groups involved in the parade to sign a contract that prohibited them from displaying on their float any item that may be

deemed sectarian. During the interview with the Events Manager she discussed how the Council 'had not gone as far as removing face painting and clothing but officials had removed flags and political banners from floats'. However, she did stress that the Council's powers were limited in relation to spectators displaying cultural symbols:

> *'The Council has absolutely no control over what happens on the highways and*
> *byways around the city centre. If a spectator waves a tricolor (Irish flag) or a*
> *Union Jack (British flag) we have no control over that. We can only control what*
> *is displayed on the parade'.*

To deter spectators from bringing political flags, the Good Relations Department designed its own Saint Patrick's Day flag which promoted the shamrock as a shared symbol. In 2019 over 10,000 of these flags were given to spectators free of charge. According to the Good Relations Officer, initiatives such as this have been successful as they have helped to redefine Belfast's SPD celebrations in an accommodative way:

> *'I feel the event has come a long way in terms of inclusion. Perceptions take a*
> *long time to change but feedback from our survey show that both communities*
> *are coming into the city to celebrate with 90% of the respondents describing the*
> *event as inclusive'.*

However, there are three reasons why the annual survey which the Good Relations Officer referred to should be treated with caution. Firstly, the sample size was capped at two hundred. Secondly, the survey was administered during the parade and therefore only included those who attended the event with no consideration given to those who did not attend. Finally, there was only one question that related to the issue of inclusion and even it was flawed as it asked the respondents a question that they were not in a position to give an

informed answer about i.e. 'To what extent are representatives from all communities in Belfast participating in the Saint Patrick's Day celebrations'. Considering these methodological weaknesses, the authors will now discuss the findings of their primary research.

In total 810 questionnaires were completed, with 56% from the CRN community and 44% form the PUL community which is reflective of the demographics of the city (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency 2019). From the sample 68% had attended a SPD event in the last five years and 78% of those who attended described the parade as inclusive. A less favourable image of the event was projected when the data was analysed under the two main ethnic groupings i.e. CRN and PUL. In this case of the CRN respondents 96% had visited a SPD event in the 5 last years and 98% of them felt the event was inclusive. This is compared to only 32% of the PUL respondents attending the event within the same time period and 26% of them describing the event as inclusive. These figures reflect what was found in the 9 focus groups where the consensus from PUL participants was that SPD was a day for the CRN community, or as one individual phrased it 'the 17th March was a day for the other side'. If we delve further into the PUL data, we see that even though they grew up in the post 'troubles era' only 21% of 18-30-year olds in the survey had attended a SPD. Leonard & McKnight (2013) attribute this to the pre-existing segregated settings in which everyday lives, social interaction and relationships are structured in the city. Ninety-one percent of Housing Executive estates in Belfast are still 'highly polarised' and 90% of children are educated in segregated schools (Morrow, 2019). With limited opportunities to mix, young people, especially in working class areas, are often bound closely to their local neighbourhoods and this facilitates strong place-bound identities (Leonard & McKnight, 2013). This was apparent in the following quotes in relation to SPD:

'As a family we have never gone, nobody in our community goes. So, I suppose because of that I don't associate with SPD *and even hold a prejudice towards it'* (Female PUL Participant, FG).

'I know the council does a lot to promote it as an inclusive event. I think the real pressure comes from within your own community. In my neighbourhood there is a taboo about SPD… *you just don't go there'* (Male PUL Participant, FG).

What also came across strongly in the focus groups was that for many within the PUL community attending a SPD event in its current form would be seen as a betrayal of their British identity. This is because in Northern Ireland cultural expression is not a peripheral concern; it is at the core of the political debate over the constitutional status of Northern Ireland i.e. should Northern Ireland remain part of the United Kingdom or should it be reunited with the Republic of Ireland. Since the Good Friday Peace Agreement (1998) cultural events like SPD have become the new battleground as the contending parties race to declare their symbolic capital as the valid currency in the nation's constitution (McEvoy, 2011). As cultural expression is presented in mutually exclusive positions in which if one side wins the other necessarily loses, this 'us and them mentality' (Jasper, 1997) has been counterproductive to the Council's efforts to make SPD a joint celebration:

'By going to the parade and dressing in green you're dressing up as a Nationalist, you're identifying with and supporting that part of the community' (Female PUL Participant, FG).

Building on this, several of the PUL respondents in the focus group discussed the pressure they felt at community level for not being able to attend the event with one respondent stating that 'there was an unwritten rule in her neighbourhood (the Shankill) not

to attend''. Another respondent went as far as stating he was 'afraid' to attend because if he

was seen there would be repercussions:

> *'If there were photographs of me on social media celebrating St Patrick's Day, I*
>
> *would not be able to go back home'* (Male PUL Participant, FG).

To the outsider this quote may seem very melodramatic but from his experience of

trying to recruit groups from the PUL community to participate in the parade the manager of

Beat Carnival believes these fears are well founded. He explains that PUL groups feel they

cannot participate in the event if something has happened in the city in the build up to SPD

that has created political tension. In the following quote he refers to the power of

paramilitary groups which, despite the ceasefire, still exist and use the threat of violence to

exert considerable influence on working class neighbourhoods (Knox, 2016):

> *'Just last week we were working with a group which decided that they couldn't*
>
> *take part in the Saint Patrick's Day parade because of paramilitary pressure…*
>
> *that is serious for them because they are living in the community and although*
>
> *they want to get involved and have attended the workshops it is just too much risk*
>
> *for the individuals involved'* (Manager, Beat Carnival).

As alluded to earlier in this discussion 'flags' remain one of the most divisive aspects of SPD

celebrations in Belfast. Throughout the world the tricolor (the Irish National Flag) is a

common symbol at Saint Patrick's Day events, yet for the PUL community in Northern

Ireland it creates what Ross (2007) referred to as 'psychocultural drama'. McEvoy (2011)

discussed how it is common for ethnic groups involved in conflict to use culture symbols

such as flags to articulate and assert political claims and mobilise supporters. The tricolor is

the national flag of Ireland; therefore, it sends out a strong political message to those in

favour of a reunited Ireland (CRN community). However, for the PUL community the tricolor, is a threat to their Union with the United Kingdom and its presence makes the event a 'cold house' for the PUL community. This was reflected in the primary data gathered for this study because when asked what more could be done to make Belfast's SPD celebrations more inclusive, 91% of the PUL respondents in the survey referred to the removal of tricolors. Similarly, in the focus groups the PUL participants discussed how tricolors were intimidating and made them feel scared, different and excluded:

> *'I would not want to be at an event full of tricolors - I would feel really unsafe and would want to get out of there'* (Male PUL Participant, FG).

> *'This is not an inclusive event, there are too many Irish flags (tricolors) used to intimidate Protestants (PUL). Catholics (CRN) use the holiday to enforce bigotry beliefs that they don't usually express in other days of the year. It is an opportunity for them to re-enforce beliefs which caused the troubles, we are a fake progressive society'* (Male PUL Participant, FG).

In 2012 'flags' became even more divisive when Belfast City Council voted to restrict the flying of the Union flag from the City Hall every day throughout the entire year to just fifteen designated days. The PUL community regarded this as an attack on their identity resulting in violent protests which lasted over forty days during which over one hundred police officers were injured, and a number of politicians were handed death threats and had their homes attacked. This became known as the 'flag protests.' However, these protests were not just about the flags as the PUL community felt that this was just another example of how their culture and British identity had been under attack since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. According to the manager of the Events Unit at Belfast City Council the

'flag protests' had a negative impact on Belfast SPD celebrations with PUL participation rates in the float down by 75%. There was also a downturn in applications for the SPD Fund after Flag Protest as the two communities became more entrenched in their bitter 'culture war'. This links into Merkel's (2014) argument that festivals and events are often characterised by contentious debates over ownership and control. In this study some of the PUL community were ambivalent towards Saint Patrick whilst others were resentful and felt that that their patron saint had been 'hijacked' by the CRN community. Blame was directed primarily at Sinn Fein, the largest CRN political party in the council, who had been accused of politicising the event:

> *'Sinn Fein has made* SPD *not just a celebration of Irishness but an anti-British Statement which is problematic'* (Councillor, Progressive Unionist Party).

During the interview with a Sinn Fein politician he was candid on how his party had made the growth of this event a political priority. On several occasions, he referred back to the 'troubles' and how the older generation will remember the restrictions placed on SPD celebrations. He also discussed how 'people in Northern Ireland should be proud to wear the tricolor on SPD as this was their national flag'. For Sinn Fein March 17th is a day to express Irishness. How this 'Irishness' is expressed in the context of Northern Ireland, where the Flag Protests and more recently the Brexit debate have brought the constitutional question to the fore, could be interpreted by some as 'masquerade politics' (Cohen, 1993). For instance, a former Government Minister who represented the Democratic Unionist Party, the largest PUL political party, discussed how Sinn Fein presence at the front of the parade politicised the event and acted as a deterrent for the PUL community:

'Political parties participating in the parade helps politicise it. And let's be clear, that is not a mistake, that's a deliberate decision by the likes of Sinn Fein to take part in the parade to politicise it – to take ownership of the parade and send out a political message. There is no doubt this prevents it from being inclusive' (Former Government Minister, Democratic Unionist Party).

All political parties were invited to take part in the parade but to date the two largest PUL parties have refused to attend. The manager of Beat Carnival accused these PUL politicians of 'playing to their communities' and 'not leading by example'. Interestingly, a 64-year-old PUL male from the Shankill Focus Group was equally critical of local politicians and accused them of 'whipping up hysteria' over cultural symbols such as flags and parades.

'It is the politicians that whip up the hysteria. They want to keep us at each other's throats, so they can get re-elected. Peace would destroy their power base. When it comes to culture, they keep playing the sectarian card and making everything out to be us against them' (Male PUL Participant, FG).

This opinion was echoed during an interview with a councillor from the Alliance Party, one of the more moderate political parties. He discussed how key policy issues such as health and education are often superseded by cultural identity issues during elections in Northern Ireland. As a result, many local politicians feel they must be seen to be some sort of prototype Unionist or Nationalist to get re-elected:

'The problem with cultural expression in Northern Ireland is that our politicians have to be seen to be more British than politicians in London (England) and more Irish than anyone in Dublin (Ireland). The result is a toxic non-inclusive environment' (Councillor, Alliance Party).

This councillor also discussed how politicians have a polarised view of events often referring to them as either 'our event' or 'their event'. As Chair of the Council's Strategic Development Committee, he found funding decisions extremely frustrating as some councillors voted politically and failed to consider the economic potential of events such as SPD. This was summed up in the following quote from a PUL politician who was asked if SPD should receive more funding to help attract tourists:

> 'I think SPD gets enough funding, there is no doubt about that. T*he Orange Order doesn't enjoy the same level of funding for the 12th July parade. In fact, it doesn't get money directly from the Belfast City Council because the Union flag is on display at its parades. There are a huge number of Irish flags carried in the* SPD *parade, yet it continues to get funding from the Council' (*Councillor, Ulster Unionist Party).

This would suggest that within the chambers of the Belfast City Council SPD has become a 'political football' as the political parties fight to fund events that they perceive to be representative of their culture. Ironically, the Good Friday Peace Agreement (1998) was partly responsible for this because it called for 'parity of esteem and of just and equal treatment for the identity, ethos and aspirations of both communities' (Brown and MacGinty 2003, p.187). The 'parity of esteem' principle implies that both sides of the community are equally funded regarding cultural events. As SPD is perceived by many within the PUL community to be a single identity event, politicians do not want to be seen to be 'selling out their group' (Ross, 2007, p.327). Consequently, SPD has been starved of funding. In fact, in 2019 the switch-on of the city's Christmas tree lights was the only annual event that had a smaller budget. The manager of Beat Carnival described Belfast's budget as 'pitiful' compared to the amount of money invested in SPD parades in other cities:

'In 2019 our budget for the parade was £45,000 compared to Dublin's £2million.

Even when we benchmarked with other events in England their budget ranged

from £200,000-£500,000. It really is so underfunded in comparison' (Manager,

Beat Carnival).

Unsurprisingly, this lack of funding has resulted in a sub-standard product and even

those from the CRN community were critical of the event. For instance, a 23-year-old CRN

female from the West Belfast Focus Group described the parade as 'too short' with 'not

enough in it to make it worthwhile travelling into the city centre and paying for parking'.

Another participant from the same focus group said he felt embarrassed when overseas

visitors travelled to Belfast specifically for the SPD celebrations:

'I think it is embarrassing when you see other cities around the world celebrating

SPD on a much larger scale. I feel sorry for the tourists who come here, they

must be really disappointed' (Male CRN Participant, FG).

At an international level the SPD marketplace is very competitive. Saint Patrick is

now a global brand and throughout the world Saint Patrick is a major tourism draw as

cites, some of which have very little connection to the saint, jump on the 'green for the

day bandwagon' (Cronin & Adair, 2006). The first official SPD parade was held in

Boston in 1737 but New York has surpassed it and now has the largest parade in the

world attracting over two million visitors. This is closely followed by Dublin which, in

1996, reimaged its SPD celebrations as an international festival. In the United Kingdom

huge SPD festivals have taken place in Birmingham and Manchester - locations

containing considerable Irish diasporic communities. Other cities with strong Irish

connections that invest heavily in their SPD celebrations include Buenos Aries, Sydney

and Auckland. Of course, big public celebrations are not confined to Ireland and major

centres of the diaspora; diverse locations such as Euro Disney Paris and Moscow's

central thoroughfare of Novy Arbat have hosted parades. In fact, the Caribbean island of Montserrat is the only place in the world other than the Republic of Ireland to celebrate SPD as a public holiday and Saint Patrick is celebrated during a week-long schedule of Caribbean style festivities. These examples are in contrast to Belfast's celebrations which are a low-key affair targeted at a domestic audience. In 2019 a total of 15,000 people watched the parade and only 23% were from outside of Northern Ireland. Most of these were from England (35%) and the Republic of Ireland (20%) with only 22% staying more than 2 nights in the city (Belfast City Council, 2019).

In most cities these tourism figures would be a cause for concern but in Belfast, where inclusion and not tourism has been the overriding objective, they have been seen as acceptable. This is summed up in the following quote from the Tourism Officer at Belfast's City Council who, rather reluctantly, accepted that tourism was seen as a bonus and not a priority:

'*Inclusion is what the event is being is judged on not tourism and as a Tourism Officer I must accept this event has a greater role to play in the city than just attracting tourists'.*

During the interview with the Events Manager she explained how she requested 'pop-up stands' be erected around the city in 2019 in an attempt to improve the visitor experience. Unfortunately, the councillors rejected her request on the grounds that the event was 'geared towards locals not tourists'. As the sole funder, Belfast City Council has been reluctant to relinquish control of this event which has meant that Tourism NI (the National Tourism Agency for product development and domestic marketing) and Tourism Ireland (a cross-body agency responsible for overseas promotion) have been kept on the fringes:

> *Tourism Ireland and Tourism NI are very good, but they can only promote the*
> *material we give them and at present this is not very much* (Events Manager,
> Belfast City Council).

The Chair of the Strategic Development Committee at Belfast City Council reinforced this when he referred to the lack of investment in overseas promotion and the negative image potential international visitors may have of Belfast. He referred to the infamous Simpsons episode to highlight the challenges an agency, such as Tourism Ireland, face when promoting Belfast as a SPD destination:

> *'If you are sitting in the USA and the only thing you know about SPD in Belfast is*
> *the first 30 seconds of a Simpsons episode where green and orange leprechauns*
> *start punching each other and someone in the street shouts 'oh no, it's the wrong*
> *type of Irish' you're unlikely to come to Belfast* (Councillor, Alliance Party).

However, if SPD celebrations are to survive the restructuring planned under Belfast's new Cultural Strategy, 'A City Imagining 2020-2030', the current lacklustre approach to tourism must change. The vision of this strategy is to have a portfolio of home-grown events that create a quality visitor experience in the global market. In order to achieve this goal, the Council plans to restructure its event programme and use its funding to develop five signature home-grown events. This will be a competitive process with priority given to events that are 'capable of growing the city's cultural tourism to the next level'. However, the benchmark of 65,000 overseas annual visitors by 2023 is over quadruple the number that SPD celebrations currently attracts. Therefore, if Belfast is to compete in this international market, a radical rethink of how the Council approaches SPD is necessary.

The Tourism Development Officer at Belfast City Council regarded the new Cultural Strategy as a great opportunity and discussed how SPD in Belfast would appeal to the VFR market and the 'culturally curious tourist' if branded properly. The Emerging Markets

Manager at Tourism Ireland also recognised this as an opportunity to attract tourists during the off peak season and believed lessons could be learnt from Dublin and the way in which it successfully reframed its SPD celebrations into an international tourism festival in the 1990's. Between 1970 and 1995 Dublin organised an American-style carnival inviting American bands and performers in the hope that this would encourage American tourists to travel to Ireland. Initially this formula worked but by the early 1990's the event appeared to be trying to be more American than Irish. Faced with dwindling visitor numbers and negative press coverage a Government Select Committee published a damning report in 1994 which discussed how the 'Dublin parade lacked entertainment and imagination' and 'failed to adequately promote Dublin as a year-round tourism destination' (Cronin and Adair, 2006). In response, the Irish Government formed the Saint Patrick's Festival Committee and its brief identified four key functions: (a) to promote Ireland as a tourist destination; (b) to promote Ireland as a year-round destination; (c) to stage an event of such length that it made a trip to Dublin worthwhile; (d) to present a varied range of events to attract people of all ages. Following this Dublin's celebrations became a week-long festival with events spread across the city. The parade on the 17th March remained at the heart of the festival but rather than relying solely on traditional marching bands from America the organisers actively encouraged the participation of local community groups. Thus, it was a festival that sought to embrace the local communities and welcome all visitors to observe and take part in an 'Irish', rather than a repackaged American event. This reframing of SPD in Dublin has been deemed, by the Irish Government's own criteria at least, a huge success. With an estimated audience of 500,000 and a web view of 1.4 million it is now ranked second to New York as the most watched SPD parade anywhere. Visitors now come to Dublin for several days to celebrate SPD and in 2019 it attracted over 100,000 overseas visitors contributing £73million to the local economy.

Whilst Belfast can learn from Dublin's experience the Emerging Markets Manager for Tourism Ireland warned against 'just replicating Dublin'. He discussed how 'Belfast must position itself so that it has a distinct offering but can still benefit from the overall SPD brand. The Emerging Markets Manager also acknowledged that although Dublin will remain the major draw Belfast could use Dublin's popularity to its advantage. A similar point was made by a Director of the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau when he discussed the travel habits of long-haul travellers:

> *'Belfast must look at what else is on offer on the island of Ireland and work of the premises that the Dublin parade will be the main draw, but Dublin is only a two-hour drive from Belfast and tourists will have time to visit other places. Belfast needs to look at where their product could fit into the overall consumer journey'* (Emerging Markets Manager, Tourism Ireland).

> *'A week-long festival, that way Belfast is not competing directly with Dublin. Visitors can attend both events. It's only a two-hour drive from Dublin to Belfast and the majority of the long-distance travellers from countries such as the USA and China like to travel around the Island anyway'* (Director, Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau).

This lends support to the argument that Belfast must expand its SPD celebrations to more than one day. Liverpool, Birmingham, Edinburgh and London are all examples of cites in the United Kingdom that have successfully extended their SPD celebrations to leverage the economic benefits. However, for Belfast this is more than an economic decision as this would require cross community support which could be problematic given how divisive cultural identity has been. Ross (2007) recognises the challenges of developing consensus around a contested event in a divided society and urged those involved in trying to develop a new

narrative for a contested cultural symbol to look for 'commonality'. In Belfast tourism could provide this 'commonality'. However, the results from this survey would suggest otherwise, with 94% of the CRN community in favour of expanding the event into a 3-day event compared to only 10% from the PUL supporting such a move. The highest levels of poverty in the city was recorded in PUL neighbours (Morrow, 2019) yet only 15% of the PUL respondents in the sample stated that they would like to see the event developed and promoted as a tourism event and an economic driver. Thus, cultural identity trumps the economic argument. These figures also illustrate the zero-sum character of the cultural war in Northern Ireland where those involved believe there can only be a winner or a loser. For many within the PUL community investing more in SPD would be seen as a loss regardless of the economic gain.

From a political perspective, Getz and Page (2016) discuss how an event must have enough political support if it wants to grow and become a player in the event tourism market. The launch of the new Culture Strategy was supposed to refocus minds and place greater emphasis on event tourism. Yet the authors found that local councillors were still entrenched in their views regarding SPD and were unwilling to move beyond the pity politics of identity. The following two quotes would suggest that it is likely to remain trapped in a political time warp, starved of funding and its tourism potential a casualty of a bitter 'culture war'

'We must grow the event and the way to do that is to highlight the economic return and its tourism potential. This is exactly what the new strategy will force us to do' (Councillor, Sinn Fein).

'If I was convinced our community was behind it I would support it in terms of funding. At present there is no appetite for growing SPD *within my (PUL)*

community and I do not see this changing anytime soon' (Councillor, Ulster

Unionist Party).

Conclusion

To repair the damage caused by COVID-19 cities will be keen to strategically exploit

the economic potential of cultural events and include them in their tourism strategies. SPD is

one such example. It is celebrated in more countries around the world than any other national

festival. Indeed, the success of SPD in North America has been something of a catalyst for

other ethnic groups to celebrate their national days and to express their own sense of

solidarity by staging street parades and other events in the public arena (Cronin & Adair,

2006). However, as this study of Belfast has shown, even a celebrated figure like Saint

Patrick can become a contested symbol.

Belfast's SPD celebrations, like countless other urban public spectacles across the

globe, are characterised by profound intra community acrimony – by battles over power and

fights over who gets to tell /retell the story and from which position. Efforts to reframe the

event and make it inclusive have had limited success as the two main ethnic communities

prefer to protect and develop their own cultural customs and traditions rather than share a

common symbol. Like many other post conflict countries, culture in Northern Ireland is tied

to group identity and cultural expression is consumed with the battle for political legitimacy

and state sovereignty. This battle for ownership and cultural supremacy has meant that

Belfast has been unable to cash in on its authentic links to Saint Patrick. This is unlikely to

change in the near future because, despite the devastating impact COVID-19 has had on the

local economy and the prominence given to tourism as an economic driver in Belfast's new

culture strategy, the zero-sum character of the cultural war in Northern Ireland would suggest

group identity will continue to trump the economic argument.

In summary, this paper has contributed to knowledge as it has demonstrated how problematic culture and cultural events can be in a divided society and the ramifications this can have on event tourism. It has also added to the literature on SPD which, despite its global value, has been under researched. In terms of future research, there is a real need to develop a better understanding of the contested nature of cultural events and how this can affect tourism, particularly in highly complex contexts like the one studied here.

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