

Mapping emotions in social media and the press: A three-dimensional analysis of emotional references to transport in Belgian towns

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Introduction

Media representations of transport issues, and their reception among citizens, shape public attitudes toward transport services (Drexler and Hagen 2023; Scherrer 2023). For instance, media discourses may construct idealized expectations of public transport in terms of speed and comfort (Kesten et al. 2014), which can foster more critical attitudes toward mobility services once experienced in practice. Media discourses on transport elicit emotions among readers, both directly and indirectly, ranging from frustration and anger to surprise and delight (Mowri and Bailey 2022; Mathews et al. 2025). These emotional responses vary depending on whether the discourse originates from the press or social media platforms (Scherrer 2023). In Wallonia (Belgium), where major urban centres intermingle with small towns (Thomas et al. 2008), bus-related issues such as rush-hour crowding, safety concerns, and strikes are prominently represented in the media and pose challenges for bus companies (Van Meeteren et al. 2016). Belgian press and social media coverage, as in other European countries (Drexler and Hagen 2023), foregrounds problems rather than benefits. Negative emotions conveyed in these discourses are more likely to stabilize car-dependent practices than support a shift towards sustainable modes (Mendoza et al. 2020). Numerous discourse studies have examined narratives and argumentative structures in discourse on bus transportation (e.g. Guiver 2007; Thomas and Grigsby 2024), while others have focused on representations and imaginaries (e.g. Loyola et al. 2023; Olin and Mladenović 2022). Within critical discourse analysis (CDA), research on mobility has predominantly approached bus-related discourse through political and ecological lenses (Herdt and Muñoz Sanz 2023; Egan and Caulfield 2024). However, few discourse-oriented studies address the role of emotions in the construction of bus imaginaries. This paper therefore investigates how discourse and emotions jointly co-construct imaginaries surrounding bus transport and how these processes reveal power relations among Belgian media, political authorities, bus companies, and citizens. We combine automated and manual approaches to critical discourse analysis to examine a corpus of 575 press articles and 657 tweets published in Wallonia in 2022 and 2023. Drawing on Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model of CDA, we analyse textual features, discursive and interactional processes, as well as broader sociocultural practices shaping transport governance.

1. From transport modes to power relations in French-speaking Belgium

1.1 Transport modes in the press and on social media

Transport modes have long been a focus of interest in both the press and citizen discourse, particularly with regard to technological developments, the emergence of new transport modes, and the difficulties encountered by different groups of users. Discourses about transport modes are contextualised by institutional, social, spatial and temporal frames (Wodak 2008). Everyday transport practices function as social texts in which institutional discourses are accepted, contested or transformed (Doughty and Murray 2016). The what and who of traditional mainstream media messaging about transport matter, as they influence individual attitudes toward the adoption of specific transport modes. In this respect, transport discourses tend to privilege certain modes of transport while marginalizing others, a dynamic that is of crucial importance for transport services (Scherrer 2023).

Since climate issues have become widely recognised by the general public, discourses about transport modes have been increasingly intertwined with those of sustainability. News coverage has often staged an opposition between advocates of public transport for the common good, and defenders of individual freedom, who favour car and air travel (Doughty and Murray 2016). Such processes of polarisation reveal how public discourse constructs opposing cognitive frames around climate responsibility, everyday mobility needs and neighbourhood lifestyles, and how metaphors and argumentative strategies contribute to consolidating sides in the conflict rather than opening spaces for deliberation (Morales-López and Floyd 2025).

With the development of citizen discourses on social media, this duel has to some extent receded in favour of a more fine-grained focus on the concrete advantages and disadvantages of transport modes in everyday life (Osorio-Arjona et al. 2021). Social media posts align more closely with that of citizens in qualitative interviews, where participants narrate their transport stories and daily movements and where these narratives embed the embodied and emotional dimensions of travel (Doughty and Murray 2016). Social media platforms, each in their own way (Manetti et al. 2016), play an increasingly important role in the management, perception and improvement of transport systems. Today, they serve as channels of expression for users, as sources of real-time data for operators and as tools for public engagement (Georgiadis et al. 2021). Furthermore, social media posts are not solely textual; other modalities afforded by platforms (images, videos, GIFs, emojis...) are highly salient in the representation of transport (Martinez-de-Ibarreta et al. 2024). Whether through still and moving images, the visual expression of experience is central to both the articulation and the analysis of users' everyday practices on platforms (Adami and Jewitt 2016), and such visual content is sometimes even geolocated by the users (Manca et al. 2017). Recent research shows that the emergence of multimodality is transforming discourses on mobility (Metastasio et al. 2024), and that these discursive developments are accompanied by new narratives concerning the efficiency, flexibility, and sustainability of transport modes, such as the bus (Mathews et al. 2025).

1.2 Emotions as key drivers of transport practices

The influence of emotions on decision-making has been extensively studied in psychology, both to uncover the mechanisms involved and to understand the concrete ways in which emotions motivate individual behavior. Emotions are “potent, pervasive, predictable, sometimes harmful and sometimes beneficial drivers of decision making” (Lerner et al. 2015, 816). This influence manifests itself across multiple domains of individual experience, from economic and social decision-making (Lerner et al. 2015), to driving behavior (Steinhauser et al. 2018), and even the complex interactions observed in psychotherapy (Li et al. 2020), to name only a few examples. Emotions influence judgment as well as cognitive processing and shape our modes of thinking (Clore and Huntsinger 2007).

In the transport domain, emotions can exert both direct and indirect influences. For instance, anger has a direct impact in the context of driving cars: drivers increase their speed and reduce their distance from other vehicles (Steinhauser et al. 2018). By contrast, the psychological schemas underlying behaviours such as choosing to cycle to work instead of driving are indirectly shaped by emotions, particularly through the way they amplify, or fail to amplify, the effects of attention on a given task or choice. Positive and negative emotions differentially shape motivation to use various transport modes (Bretter and Pangbourne 2024). For example, negative emotions such as shame or guilt associated with car use have been shown to motivate the adoption of more sustainable transport options such as the bus, whereas sadness may instead reduce this engagement.

These emotions stem not only from direct experiences about transport, but also indirect ones. Studies have shown that insecurity or frustration about strikes, as relayed in the media, can reduce the acceptability of public transport (Mowri and Bailey 2022). Conversely, research indicates that media narratives foregrounding specific positive emotions such as conviviality, accessibility and service diversity foster greater adoption of public transport (Mathews et al. 2025). Moreover, social media narratives that highlight the diversity of users reduce the perceived distance between the public and the transport service, thereby fostering a sense of acceptance (Iori 2025). Social media is therefore increasingly regarded as essential to transport communication, since customer input is key to maintaining a positive relationship between public transport authorities and the public (Mathews et al. 2025).

Emotions drive action at the individual level, but they can also manifest as collective tendencies. Scholars have shown that collective emotions are closely linked to geographical space and mobility, notably by examining how emotive narratives shape populations' relationships to their environment and to transport. In particular, social media platforms function as relays and amplifiers of emotional contagion (Ferrara and Yang 2015), including for authorities' campaigns. On social media, increases in the volume of users' posts about public and sustainable transport modes are positively correlated with higher use of these modes, while reliance on private cars decreases (Martínez-De-Ibarreta et al. 2024). Emotionally charged messages can therefore trigger behavioural change, ultimately contributing to better transport planning and more liveable, happier neighbourhoods (Meenar et al. 2019).

2. Research Design

2.1 A corpus adapted to the Belgian settlement

Our study is situated in Belgium, which is a federal state administratively divided into three regions: the Flemish Region, the Walloon Region and the Brussels-Capital Region. Each region manages its own regional bus operator. This article examines representations of the bus service in the Walloon Region, a predominantly French-speaking region located in the south of the country. Belgium is often described as a highly urbanized, polycentric country, characterised by a large, urbanized core interspersed with numerous small and medium-sized centres (Van Meeteren et al. 2016; Belgian National Report to Habitat III 2016). In the Walloon Region, urban development has been shaped by a legacy of industrial urbanization followed by deindustrialization. Since the mid twentieth century, pronounced suburbanization has led many households to relocate to semi-rural areas around cities, producing low-density belts and dispersed housing that blur the boundary between urban and rural spaces. Walloon cities therefore form a discontinuous urban structure, with lower-density gaps between urban basins that weaken continuous urban connectivity (Van Meeteren et al. 2016; Belgian National Report to Habitat III 2016). Our study focuses on a set of 37 cities located mainly along a national road corridor. For analytical purposes, these cities are grouped into three categories according to population size: small cities (up to 12,500 inhabitants, 47% of the cited cities), medium-sized cities (12,501 to 25,000 inhabitants, 27%) and large cities (more than 25,000 inhabitants, 26%).

Belgian transport practices reflect its settlement structure: it records an above-EU average public transport coverage (Belgium: 19.6 pkm; EU: 16.9 pkm: Eurostat 2025), which is largely driven by dense urban cores and intercity rail networks (Tori et al. 2025). However, the Walloon region stands out for having the least sustainable commuting patterns in the country: residents often travel longer distances by car, a situation linked to the comparatively weak regional economy and the need to seek employment far from their place of residence (Dujardin et al. 2012). Particularly in non-urban areas, the lack of attractive alternatives, concerns about public transport reliability, and the superior comfort of private cars constitute

major barriers to reducing car use (Tori et al. 2025). At the same time, difficulties associated with car ownership (notably financial costs) and the localized availability of alternatives (public transport, shared mobility, cycling infrastructure) can act as important enablers of more sustainable practices, although they are unevenly distributed across Walloon urban, peri-urban and rural communes (Tori et al. 2025). These transport patterns therefore shape a distinctive image of the Walloon city, oscillating between deindustrializing cores and underserved peripheries, and recurrently problematized in Belgian news media and citizens' discourses. To analyse this imaginary, we draw on a corpus of 575 press articles from 31 diverse French-language Belgian news outlets and 657 tweets from bus users published in the Walloon Region in 2022 and 2023, each of which mentions at least one of the 37 cities and the lexical item "bus" and/or "TEC" (name of Wallonia's regional bus operator).

2.2 A three-dimensional model to explore emotions in transport discourses

Our work combines quantitative methods with a qualitative research design to address the respective limitations of each approach and to implement a critical discourse analytical framework (Fairclough 1995) adapted to transport-related discourses. This framework is operationalized as a three-dimensional model that examines (i) textual conventions, (ii) interpretative content, and (iii) connections to specific sociocultural practices in transport governance and practices.

In the first dimension, we analyse the formal properties of the texts themselves and conduct a computational analysis of terms, keywords and multiword expressions occurring in the press and on Twitter with the software Sketch Engine. This step provides an overview of what is said about different transport modes and how it is said in each type of discourse: we highlight the main contrasts between texts originating from the press and Twitter, and we deliver a thematic characterization of texts associated with different city-size categories.

In the second dimension, we qualitatively examine discourse in context. We first analyse emojis in the Twitter citizens corpus, and we provide evidence that they function as informational, referential, affective and evaluative cues that structure readers' interpretation of the texts' tone. We then investigate the polarity scores of press articles and tweets referring to the 40 cities. A polarity score represents an assessment of the overall emotional orientation of a text, classified as positive, neutral or negative, an orientation that can strongly influence the reader's representation of the transport mode.

In the third dimension, we investigate the relationship between the discursive content of press articles and tweets and the broader social and ideological context in which it is embedded. We analyse the metaphors used by journalists and citizens to describe the 40 cities and show how different city sizes and different discursive sources mobilise distinct imaginaries and power relations between citizens, public authorities and the transport operator. We examine how discursive trends shape imaginaries of the bus.

3. How discourses map emotions about transport modes

3.1 Variation of the thematic content

Across municipalities of all sizes, and across both social media and the press, transport practices emerge as a thematically variable concern in public discourse: texts primarily refer to transport services, strikes, traffic regulations and road accidents as key issues. Transport is represented as a practical constraint, and it also operates as a lens through which citizens and institutions negotiate responsibility and blame in the management of local problems.

In small towns, Twitter users focus less on ongoing assessments of service quality and more on issues related to basic access: complaints target the concrete absence or scarcity of connections, recurrent disruptions, infringements of the traffic code, fallen trees blocking roads

or localised citizen protests. Deviations and detours appear as unanticipated constraints imposed on residents, and are framed as major obstacles in everyday transport.

In contrast, Twitter discourse about medium-sized and large cities alternates between a reference to failure and to quality of public transport services, sometimes even in the same post, as in the following example:

- “Grève sauvage au TEC-Liège. Le dépôt de Jemeppe toujours à l’arrêt. Robermont et Rocourt roulent normalement.” [Wildcat strike at TEC-Liège. The Jemeppe depot is still at a standstill. Robermont and Rocourt are operating normally.]

In large cities, although Twitter conversations address individual, everyday concerns, there is also a tendency to foreground good humour, curiosity and a positive experience of daily transport, as in the following example:

- “Bon, je teste la nouvelle gare des bus, juste pour le fun, alors que je pourrais rentrer à pied.” [Well, I’m trying out the new bus station, just for fun, even though I could walk home.]

The press corpus constructs transport in a more politicized way. First, the lexicon used in press articles is more strongly shaped by institutional and partisan references: names of political parties and of transport operators occur frequently in press articles and are nearly absent from the Twitter corpus. This contrast indicates that press discourse tends to address events with broader institutional scope, where political actors occupy centre stage.

At the city size level in the press, large cities are primarily framed through the lens of infrastructure problems, with emphasis on investment decisions, maintenance, contracts and reforms. Citizens do not disappear entirely, but they tend to be represented in a depersonalized form, as users, passengers or numbers in ridership statistics, rather than as named individuals engaging in protest or dialogue. This lexical pattern signals a transfer of attention from citizen experiences to systemic functioning and governance, with transport constructed as a field managed by political and technocratic actors.

Medium sized municipalities occupy an intermediate position. Here, transport issues are associated with terms that relate both to institutional management and to counter powers, introducing figures who expose perceived dysfunctions or injustices: local authorities, technical services, and citizen councils. Individual initiatives remain visible, but they constitute only one component within a wider configuration of actors, as a collectivity:

- “Les navetteurs du Brabant wallon attendent en moyenne 25 minutes leur correspondance train/bus.” [Commuters from the Walloon Brabant wait an average of 25 minutes for their train–bus connection.]

Smaller towns are more often presented through residents’ narratives of constrained or absent services, almost what we find on Twitter, but with a less concrete focus on their individual daily journeys. Articles foreground complaints, petitions and renunciations, and give prominence to individual or collective initiatives that seek redress from authorities. Citizens appear as active subjects who articulate grievances and attempt to influence local transport arrangements. The weight of their voice seems comparatively higher than in coverage of larger municipalities, where institutional actors dominate the discursive space.

3.2 Users’ visual engagement with transport

Emojis function as compact semiotic resources through which users convey not only information but also emotion and experiences in relation to public transport. They provide crucial cues for the interpretation of a text. Examining them makes it possible to understand how citizens frame their everyday bus experience on Twitter, negotiating a balance between emotional response, practical reporting and place-based identity markers.

In the Twitter corpus, we identify 283 emojis, which are predominantly concentrated in tweets about large cities, whereas tweets referring to small or medium-sized cities make far less use of emoji-based visual resources. The most frequent emojis categories are: (1) faces and emotions (e.g. 😂🤔), (2) indications and directions (e.g. ➡️📍), (3) alerts and warnings (e.g. ⚠️🚧), and (4) means of transport (e.g. 🚆🚌). Functionally, the first category operates as an affective and evaluative cue that structures readers' interpretation of the texts' tone. The second category provides practical reading guidelines, contributing to the semantic organisation of messages by orienting the reader through the post. The third category is primarily informational, signaling concrete updates related to bus circulation. The fourth category is referential, visually representing the main topic of the text, namely transport modes. Together, these four types of emojis are essential to the interpretation and comprehension of the posts.

With regard to emotions specifically, we observe a wide range of feelings conveyed through emojis. These include representations of joy (😄, 😊, 😁), anger (😡, 😠, 😤), curiosity (👀, 🤔), sadness (😞, 😓) and boredom (😴, 🙄), among others. Despite this diversity, the contextual interpretation of these emojis indicates that, even when they are ostensibly positive, they predominantly convey negative stances, often inflected with irony:

- “J’ai regardé en bus y’a moyen en 3h30 en changeant 3 fois de bus et faut bien viser pq le bled où je bosse est desservi par 2 bus par jour et pas à la bonne heure 😂😂😂” [I checked out, by bus you can do it in 3.5 hours with 3 transfers, but you really have to time it right because the village where I work only gets 2 buses a day, and they are not at the right time 😂😂😂]

Indeed, emojis that originally carry a more positive connotation are being repurposed by Twitter users. While the laughing-crying emojis (😂, 🤔) could once represent genuine laughter, they are now used to signal the irony expressed by users when faced with a perceived paradox between the expectations placed upon them and the bus service, or directed toward institutional actors discussing mobility. These emojis also appear most frequently in the “faces and emotions” category in the largest cities, further reinforcing this negative tone in the expression of users’ experiences with buses.

It is therefore primarily negative, or negatively interpreted, visual resources that appear in the corpus of bus-related tweets. However, a close examination of the data shows that these are not merely raw negative emotions vented for relief, in a purely cathartic manner. On the contrary, these tweets are emotionally charged yet also articulated as claims and demands:

- “Quand ton train est remplacé par un bus et que le bus, prévu à 5:45 arrive 40' après et se tape (avec toi) toutes les gares... 😡 Signalé à la CEO SNCB No Answer 🤔” [When your train is replaced by a bus, and the bus scheduled for 5:45 shows up 40 minutes late and then stops at every single station with you on it... 😡 Reported to the SNCB CEO, no answer 🤔]

These messages often contain an explicit complaint or a specific request, which highlights the purpose of expressing emotions on social media: it is less about sharing personal feelings than about bearing witness in order to prompt changes in bus practices. By sharing emojis, users physically embody their emotions within the digital sphere. Just as words and gestures are material and available to others in physical space, emotions pertain to individual lived experience. Although interlocutors may recognise emotions through facial expressions or body language in offline environments, emotions have no inherent materiality online. By sharing emojis, users give their feelings a distinct, quasi-material presence that becomes perceptible to readers.

The emotional function of emojis also enables internet users to turn Twitter into a form of personal diary, in which they track journeys, events and news alongside the feelings and emotions associated with them. Emojis thus become a shared linguistic resource, relying on standardised facial representations and dispensing with the need for lengthy verbal descriptions.

However, in the transport domain, this form of public intimacy or “extimacy” (in Lacan’s sense) does not function as a mere display of everyday life or as simple everyday exhibitionism: it primarily reflects a search for empathy. By materially setting down an emotion through emotional emojis, users invite others to resonate with it. In addition, the warning emojis can serve to capture the attention of other users, to alert them to an incident and to prompt them to adjust their behaviour in response to unexpected disruptions in bus services. In both cases (emotion and warning), emojis act as calls to action addressed, on the one hand, to other transport users, who may recognise and share similar feelings or experiences, and, on the other, to bus operators, implicitly reminding them of what should be changed and of what does and does not work in everyday mobility.

3.3 Polarized references of the cities

The results of the polarity analysis of the corpus are presented in Figure 1, where an emotional score of the posts has been coded in dark green, light green, yellow, orange and red. 37 cities are mentioned in the press, but only 32 are mentioned on Twitter. This visual representation indicates that, for all the cities mentioned both in the press corpus and in the tweets, most of the textual content referring to buses is neutral or negative. Neutral posts typically provide relatively objective descriptions of situations or informational content, such as bus timetables or bus route diversions.

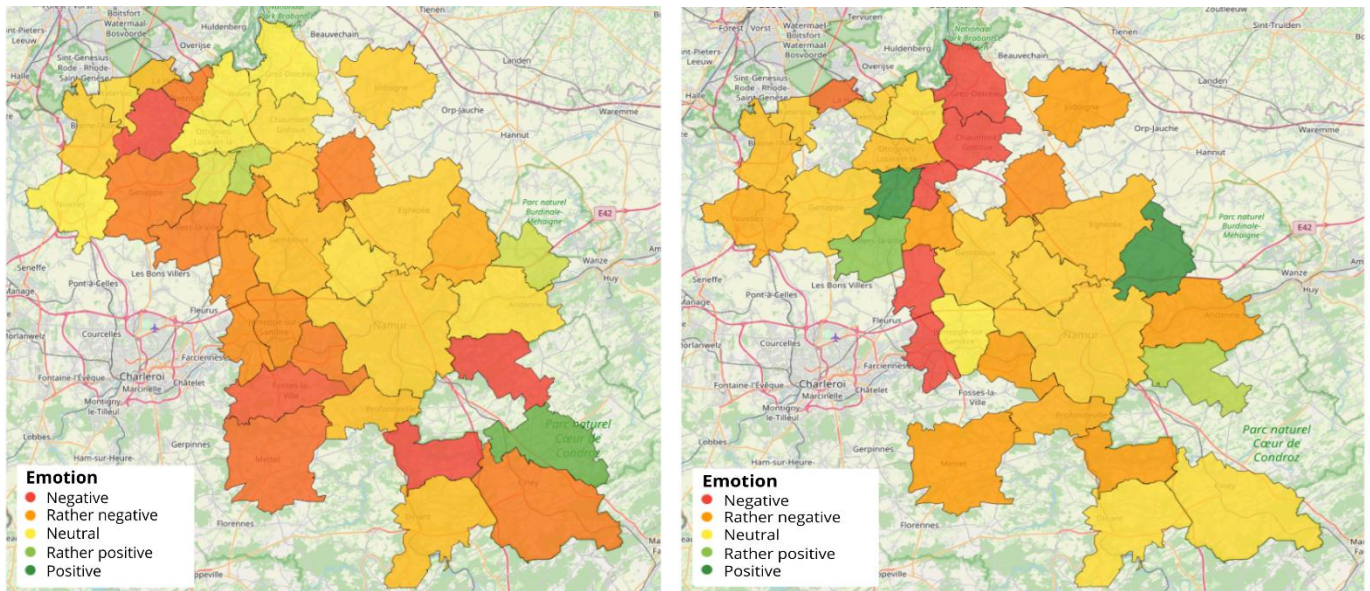


Figure 1: Maps showing polarity scores by city (left: press articles, 37 cities; right: tweets, 32 cities)

Negative references to buses in both the press and Twitter relate to problems regarding the bus service (stress, delays, feelings of insecurity, discomfort...), and negative content can be cumulative:

- “Cette situation devient ingérable selon les syndicats qui craignent des réactions de mécontentement de la clientèle. Nous avons déjà eu en juin trois agressions

physiques et avec les températures qui grimpent cette semaine, les esprits ne risquent pas de se calmer" [According to the trade unions, the situation is becoming unmanageable, and there are concerns about increasingly dissatisfied reactions from users. Three physical assaults have already occurred in June, and with temperatures rising this week, tensions are unlikely to subside]

Only a small number of cities are evaluated positively in the press, and even less on Twitter. Positive posts typically refer to favourable events or initiatives and are often accompanied by expressions such as “well done” or “good news”.

- “Des navettes de bus sont ainsi mises gratuitement en service entre la gare et le festival” [Free shuttle bus services are operated between the railway station and the festival]

What emerges from the analysis is that polarity is not necessarily correlated with city size, but rather with the number of messages. Cities with very low visibility, that is, with only a small number of articles or tweets, tend to display more extreme scores. Since the cities with the fewest messages are often, though not always, the smallest ones, this may introduce a bias in the interpretation of transport practices for these cities. It is therefore not city size as such that shapes the evaluative profile, but primarily the volume of press articles and tweets in which the city is mentioned. This finding calls for further reflection on the role of the media, in particular, in constructing representations of smaller cities.

Comparing these two maps also confirms that there is a fragmentation of discourse between the press and social media. The two corpora are distributed differently, particularly when we focus on the topics of the most negatively and positively referenced texts. In the press, negative articles largely revolve around feelings of insecurity, physical assaults and nightlife, whereas on Twitter these themes are scarcely addressed. Instead, the everyday reality described by users on these platforms concerns disruptions to traffic and delays affecting journeys to school or work. Similarly, positive content in the press mainly takes the form of reports on the opening of a new TEC bus depot or the launch of a new express line, foregrounding the inauguration ceremony and the people present, sometimes including political figures. These “good news” items appear rather distant from users’ everyday experiences, whereas social media users tend instead to celebrate positive behaviours in their daily bus practices. Examples include expressing satisfaction when a bus arrives on time or praising drivers for their attentiveness towards passengers:

- “Petit bonheur du jour. Oublier ma liseuse dans le bus vendredi soir. Appeler le TEC BW ce matin. M'entendre dire qu'ils ont bien ma liseuse et qu'ils la donneront à un chauffeur qui me la remettra ce soir quand je prendrai mon bus vers Wavre. #HappyMe” [Small joy of the day: I forgot my e-reader on the bus on Friday evening, called TEC BW this morning, and was told they had found it and would give it to a driver so that I can get it back this evening on my bus to Wavre. #HappyMe]

This example of the driver’s role points to another salient aspect of the polarity analysis: unlike the press corpus, the Twitter corpus appears to be structured around concrete objects of polarization. In the tweets, polarization takes a markedly tangible form. Bus drivers, for instance, are variously portrayed as caring, as victims (of assault), or as reckless (driving like rally racers, using their phone at the wheel, etc.). The same applies to TEC as an institution, as well as to politicians and transport users, all of whom may occupy different roles within the transport journey: as facilitators of mobility, actors held responsible for incidents, or victims of transport practices. By contrast, in press articles, citizens are almost exclusively portrayed as victims of the transport system. The embodiment of polarized topics in tweets thus contrasts with a certain disembodiment of subjects in press discourse. Even when it stages

individual actors, such as politicians or transport users, and even when it reports their words verbatim, the press ultimately struggles to address the everyday concrete reality of users and to convey a vivid, recognizable image of bus services to citizens.

3.4 Portrayal of the cities

The polarization analysis of the corpus opens the path to the identification of metaphors, metonyms and allegories used to describe the 40 cities, and identification of 4 main city profiles, that participate in a framing of the transport system and the cities themselves. █

Metaphors in both articles from the press and posts from Twitter are used to empower cities: most of the time, they take the form of a metonymy for its governance, its territory, or its inhabitants. In these cases, the city appears as an active subject in the text, and primarily functions as a political or administrative actor: the city name is used metonymically to denote a governance structure. It is portrayed as empowered and strategic, embodied by local authorities and positively personified. It takes decisions (for example, agreeing to extend a bus line or applying for the continuation of a service) and collaborates with other institutions (such as the bus operator or the minister for ecology):

- “La ville d’Ottignies-Louvain-la-Neuve est candidate à la pérennisation d’un futur TEC à la demande sur son territoire”. [The city of Ottignies-Louvain-la-Neuve has applied to host a future on-demand TEC service on a permanent basis within its territory.]

The city’s name also functions as a metonym for its inhabitants. It becomes a speaking, embodied community that mobilizes or voices concern, and is endowed with collective expectations and collective emotions. Through this metonymic shift, references to the municipality may in fact designate local elected representatives (mayors, aldermen), mobilised citizens, young people living in the city, or shared sentiments such as a sense of relief among the population.

However, most of the time, metaphors are used to disempower cities. Cities appear as passive or impersonal subjects, represented as victims of a system, subjected to external action and frequently portrayed as lacking control or agency, whether in positive or negative terms:

- “L’amélioration de son réseau fera de Jodoigne une ville d’autant plus attrayante.” [Improving its network will make Jodoigne an even more attractive city.]

Some cities are even depicted as orphaned of public transport: residents are portrayed as victims of a failing mobility system. Narratives also highlight the hardships imposed on children, whose right to mobility is taken away, through highly pathos-laden narratives that dramatise their situation:

- “la petite Caroline bénéficiait du transport scolaire sans aucun problème [...] Le problème survient lorsque la petite Noémie commence son parcours scolaire en prégardienne [...] Non seulement Noémie n’obtient pas le droit au transport scolaire, mais sa grande sœur se voit également débarquée du minibus à la mi-janvier. Catastrophe pour la famille”. [Little Caroline had been benefiting from school transport without any problem [...] The trouble began when little Noémie started her schooling in pre-kindergarten [...] Not only was Noémie refused the right to school transport, but her older sister was also taken off the minibus in mid-January. A catastrophe for the family.]

The study of metaphors also reveals differences in the portrayal of cities across discourse sources. In the press, medium and large-sized cities only appear in the background of other topics, whereas on Twitter they are more strongly personified and appear as sites of active citizen opposition or intense frustration linked to failing transport services or contested reforms.

By contrast, small cities are strongly personified in the press. The narrative foregrounds the difficulties faced by local communities, particularly with regard to school transport or decisions perceived as unfair. On Twitter, however, when small cities are mentioned, it is mainly as the backdrop to a difficult journey: long travel times and local isolation. The city as such remains largely absent, passive and dissolved into a narrative centred on individual experience.

Based on the metaphor analysis, we delineate four main city profiles. (1) The modern city, characterised by a proliferation of initiatives and technological solutions (electric buses, autonomous buses, on-demand bus services, etc.). This is not necessarily a large city, but rather one whose governance appears proactive, up to date and willing to innovate (for example, a university town). The emotions associated with this city model are predominantly surprise, joy and excitement. (2) The medium-sized city, which suffers from the influx of travellers typical of urban areas, along with associated problems of insecurity and poor sanitary conditions. However, in the texts, these disadvantages are counterbalanced by reference to efforts to improve the organisation of the transport service, particularly through the promotion of intermodality between cycling, buses and trains. The emotions associated with this city model are polarised between enchantment and disenchantment. (3) The laggard city. Texts referring to this profile are predominantly critical, combining complaints, incomprehension and irony in relation to a network depicted as unreliable and insufficiently modernised. For these medium to large size cities, there is no counterweight in the form of news about improvements to the bus system. Users tend to regard the state of the transport system as inevitable. The emotions associated with this city model are primarily frustration and anger. (4) The abandoned city: bus journeys in these small cities are depicted as an obstacle course, fraught with difficulties. This profile reflects the onerous reality of public transport in rural areas, where services are sparse and infrequent, especially for captive users who depend on buses for their professional activities. The emotions associated with this city model are primarily frustration and resignation.

4. Discussion

This study highlights the diversity of content published in the press and on Twitter concerning bus transport in the Walloon region of Belgium, as well as its link to power relations. The three-dimensional framework has structured the analysis by offering three complementary levels of understanding, which mutually confirm and enrich one another, moving from the concrete observation of texts to the sociocultural interpretation of these textual practices.

In line with Fairclough's (1995) first analytical dimension, which focuses on the textual conventions and formal properties of discourse, the bus appears in the study not merely as a means of transportation: it constitutes a political and social object revealing power relations, citizen emotions, and urban governance dynamics. Indeed, choices in favour of the car or the bus reflect class interests and power relations, producing congestion, inequalities of access, and a form of "fragmented urbanism" (Marks 2020). The bus is represented as a public good that structures citizenship, through a governance typology combining service quality, accessibility, and political choice (Souza Vieira 2025). However, emotions such as insecurity or discomfort are also identified as structuring both practices and evaluative judgements regarding bus use (Stratford and Byrne 2023). The thematic analysis of keywords and multiword expressions reveals that press articles privilege lexical fields linked to governance, infrastructure, and political decision-making, and frame depersonalized citizens. Individual experiences are backgrounded, and the bus becomes an object of institutional debate. This pattern frames individuals as passive victims rather than active agents of mobility. On Twitter, citizen discourse exhibits different linguistic and thematic conventions, mainly depending on city

size. In small towns, the texts foreground individual experiences and personify the city, emphasizing everyday mobility challenges. Medium-sized cities oscillate between institutional critique and citizen contextualization, linking lived experiences to responsibilities of local actors. Large cities appear as abstract entities, with discourse focusing on systemic effects rather than personal accounts, much as in press coverage. Consequently, the textual analysis reveals two power strata structuring the imaginaries of the bus : the press, which shapes the institutional agenda and steers governance issues about transport, often disconnected from individual realities, while citizens, drawing on their everyday mobility experiences, contribute on social media to the construction of imaginaries, and question the attribution of responsibilities. These conclusions are consistent with previous studies that highlight the opposition between “episodic framing” (observed on social media), which reduces the attribution of political responsibility, and “thematic framing” (observable in the press), which increases the attribution of responsibility to political actors (Boukes 2021).

Consistent with the second dimension of Fairclough’s model, our analysis of the interactional value of emojis and of the polarised expression of texts shows that textual content not only refers to various themes and actors, but also actively engages readers by providing information and conveying emotions, guiding their interpretation and eliciting empathy. Research over the past decades has shown that emojis function as paraverbal cues, intensifying the emotional valence of messages (Erle et al. 2021). In the Twitter corpus, the analysis of emojis shows that they fulfil multiple, partly overlapping, expressive and pragmatic functions. First, emotions are conveyed through highly frequent emojis such as the laughing-crying face (😂), which serve to signal tone or to disambiguate messages; in this respect, their use is primarily informative. Second, emojis can function as reference points for metaphorical judgements and for the attribution of responsibility, as in the use of the crying face (😭). Third, emojis also perform a conative function, oriented towards the addressee and intentionally mobilised to guide other Twitter users in their mobility journeys, for instance through warning symbols (⚠️). Our analysis reveals functional differences in emoji use according to the size of the cities referenced. In smaller cities, emotional intensity and dramatization are more pronounced than in other city sizes: the location and intensity of emotions reflect individuals’ proximity to transport-related issues. In other words, the more directly users are affected, the stronger the emotional orientation of their discourse. In larger cities, by contrast, emojis serve functions that are less overtly intentional. They enable users to convey a particular mental state in response to a situation, thereby making their emotions socially visible, fostering a sense of proximity and shared experience, as a public personal diary. Emojis thus contribute to what can be described as a “public diary” (Li et al. 2020) within episodic narratives of mobility. The interactional impact of press articles and Twitter posts also depends on how the texts are polarised, that is, on the overall evaluative orientation (positive, neutral or negative) they convey to the reader. Emotional expressions in the texts re-centre mobility as an embodied, everyday concern, as presented in previous studies. Buses are conceptualised as spaces where “emotional geographies” take shape (Roy et al. 2024). This embodiment does not operate in the same way in the press and on social media. Whereas press discourse tends to refer to mobility-related events in a relatively abstract manner, social media discourse embodies these events by foregrounding the actors affected by them. Bus drivers, politicians and victims of incidents exemplify how events are rendered concrete and vivid in citizen discourse, while this embodiment tends to be attenuated in press coverage. Moreover, on the rare occasions when emotions are mobilised in the press, they are primarily summoned through quasi-dramatic user testimonies, with heightened pathos centred on vulnerable populations. Emotion is thereby instrumentalised in the service of a broader narrative chosen by the media, whereas on Twitter it appears more spontaneous, emerging directly from lived experience. Embodiment is central to the resonance

that discourse can generate among its readers: by realistically embodying a social situation, discourse facilitates readers' empathy both with the situation itself and with the individual who articulates it. Indeed, previous studies suggest that narrative transportation (Walkington et al. 2020) and emotional engagement can increase empathy through an embodied simulation that invites readers to "walk in the shoes" of the Other (Arizpe 2019).

In accordance with Fairclough's third dimension, which links discourse to broader sociocultural and institutional practices, the analysis shows that, both on Twitter and in the press, city size strongly shapes the sociopolitical framing of responsibility and legitimacy in mobility issues. Our observations support the idea that cities are personified through metaphorical constructions and that a clear power struggle emerges through the metaphors employed to depict each city. In large politically structured cities, often associated with specific political parties, the bus becomes instrumentalized within political debate and mobility problems are interpreted as systemic trends rooted in institutional dynamics. Indeed, previous studies indicate that in large metropolitan areas, mobility projects tend to function as instruments of political legitimation and modernisation (Sajjad and Javed 2022). In smaller and less politically strategic municipalities, dysfunctions are understood on a case-by-case basis. Sometimes, metaphors serve to empower the city, depicting urban mobility as modern and the city itself as an active force, supported by an engaged citizenry and, by extension, effective governance. As demonstrated by Kushneruk and Kurochkina (2022), positive metaphors contribute to the construction of an attractive urban identity and to the legitimation of public authorities' actions. However, most of the time, metaphors function to disempower cities, which become instrumentalised in partisan power struggles. Cities are then depersonalised, portrayed as lagging behind and lacking control, as victims of a system and of a governance that is called into question. These negative metaphors contribute to territorial stigmatisation: cities described as declining, left behind, or lacking potential are portrayed as deficient (Borgne 2023). Within this framework, the city appears as a victim of a broader system (neoliberalism, austerity...), while at the same time being held responsible for its own decline, thereby producing a paradoxical attribution of blame (Audirac 2017).

These discursive dynamics reveal how imaginaries of the bus emerge through power relations between citizens, the media, and institutional actors, and how emotional proximity or distance shapes the experience and interpretation of mobility issues. The analysis brings to light how power, emotions, and citizen experience intertwine in shaping urban imaginaries, and shows how media and citizen discourses, although driven by distinct actors, operate within a shared sociocultural space. Institutional actors draw on users' comments to adjust their policies, while citizens, influenced by media agendas and motivated by negative emotions, reinforce their perception of dysfunctions as structural. Together, they mutually condition collective perceptions of public transport and contribute to broader ideological constructions of mobility.

Finally, we identify three main limitations of the study. First, the findings are strongly embedded in the Walloon context, whose institutional, linguistic and territorial specificities enhance the analytical depth but limit the generalisability of the results to other national or regional settings with different media systems, social media practices and public transport arrangements. Second, the analysis focuses on two discursive arenas, the online press and Twitter/X, which are central to public and emotional discourse but do not capture the full diversity of the contemporary communication ecosystem. Other platforms may involve distinct emotional regimes and multimodal practices. Finally, although the study provides a detailed analysis of emotional devices in texts, it does not empirically examine their reception by audiences, leaving the effects on perceptions, attitudes and behaviours inferred rather than directly observed. These are open paths for future research.

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