

HOW MURALS ILLUSTRATE NORTHERN IRELAND'S POLITICAL AND SECTARIAN
CONFLICT THROUGH POLITICAL AND NON-POLITICAL MESSAGES

by

Megan Milter

A Signature Honors Project Presented to the

Honors College

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for

Graduation with Honors

by

Megan Milter

Greenville, NC

December 3, 2024

Approved by:

Sachiyo Shearman

ECU School of Communication

Abstract

Belfast, Northern Ireland murals have become a significant form of expression in their community over the past few decades and reflect historical tensions between Loyalist and Republican communities in the region (Jarman, 1998). This study examined how murals in Belfast serve as visual representations of the political and sectarian conflict, particularly focusing on Loyalist, Republican, and non-aligned murals. Using a purposive sampling method using the '*Murals of Northern Ireland*' collection from 'The Claremont Colleges Digital Library' database (Crowley, 2021), 93 murals (Loyalist n=30, Republican n=31, and non-aligned n=32) are sampled. To ensure intercoder reliability, two independent coders coded these murals to find common themes, symbols, and messages. The location of each mural was contrasted to the ratio of Catholic representation in specific regions, using the 'Religious Distribution in Belfast' map (Johnson, 2001). Based on the location of the mural, this study found that there was fairly consistent representation of political and non-political messages in highly Catholic and highly Protestant areas. The key findings of this study revealed that Loyalist murals predominantly focus on British identity and Northern Ireland's union with the United Kingdom while Republican murals focus on their strong connection to the Republic of Ireland, emphasizing resistance and commemorating fallen members. In contrast, non-aligned murals address broader themes of peace, reconciliation, and cultural expression. This research demonstrates that murals in the city of Belfast serve both as a reflection of Belfast's historical divisions and a medium for post-conflict reconciliation, with a clear movement toward reducing overtly political content in favor of more inclusive, peace-oriented messages.

How Murals Illustrate Northern Ireland's Political and Sectarian Conflict

During the summer of 2024, I had the opportunity to travel to Belfast, Northern Ireland for 12 days with ECU's School of Communication, where I studied the conflict and communication in Belfast and analyzed how media, culture, and society shape perspectives, cultures, and worldviews. Our time in Belfast consisted of connecting with the local people, serving at the youth centers, hearing various guest speakers from both sides of the conflict, and exploring the city of Belfast and the Antrim Coast. Throughout my time in Belfast, I was able to observe and capture various different murals around the city's walls. The current study is further research I have done on the murals in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

Introduction of The Troubles

Murals in Northern Ireland have become symbols of the country with many depicting past and present political and religious divisions. The cities of Belfast and Derry alone contain arguably the most famous political murals in Europe (O'Donoghue, 2023). These artworks, often painted on the walls of buildings, provide insight into the historical, cultural, and political identities of the communities that created them. This section explores the role of these murals in shaping the political climate of Belfast, drawing from various academic sources, historical accounts, and sociopolitical analyses.

Northern Ireland's history has consisted of ongoing tensions between two sides of the country since the twentieth century, however the origins can be traced back hundreds of years. At the beginning of the 17th century, the Plantation of Ulster settled Protestants from Scotland and the North of England, which started the sectarian split in the population (Imperial War Museums, 2024). At the beginning of the twentieth century, there was a push to break the link Ireland had with Britain and to stop England's rule over Ireland. However, in the north of

Ireland, citizens wanted to maintain the union with Great Britain. This matter caused a large argument between both sides, as the native Irish and English people wanted different things. In 1920, the British settled the argument by dividing the country- granting independence to Ireland, which consisted of almost entirely Catholics, and keeping Northern Ireland, which was mostly Protestants, within the United Kingdom. Despite this resolution, almost half of the citizens of Northern Ireland were Irish nationalists who wanted independence from Britain. This separation led to the start of The Troubles, a violent sectarian conflict from 1968 to 1998.

The Troubles refer to a 30-year period of conflict in Northern Ireland that revolved around the Loyalist and Republican disagreement over whether Northern Ireland should remain a part of the United Kingdom or become a part of the republic of Ireland. The major contenders in this conflict on the Loyalist side were the British army, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), and the Ulster Defense Regiment (UDR) (Wallenfeldt, 2024). On the Irish side, there is the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA). These groups used tactics such as street fighting, sensational bombings, sniper attacks, roadblocks, and internment without trial. About 3,600 people were killed and more than 30,000 were wounded during the Troubles. In August 1969, intense sectarian violence broke out in Belfast and Derry, involving days of rioting (Levin, 2023). As a result, peace walls were initially built by the British Army as barriers in Northern Ireland to deter violence between the Republican and Loyalist communities. These 20 ft high walls are made from brick and steel or iron and are still standing today, extending for a total of 20 miles through Belfast and other cities in the country including Derry, Portadown, and Lurgan (Levin, 2023).

The Good Friday Agreement was signed in 1998, which ended the period of The Troubles. This agreement gave a formal recognition to the multiple identities of Northern

Ireland, and stated that citizens could identify as British, Irish, or both (Lawless, 2023). Despite this settlement, the walls dividing the Republican and Loyalist sides of the country still remain, and tensions still separate these two communities.

Murals in Northern Ireland

Murals are a very prominent feature of Northern Ireland's landscape, often showcasing the unsettled history of the region in terms of political, religious, and historical conflict among communities. These murals paint the walls of Belfast, and each mural tells a different story of the history.

Murals in Belfast are rich in symbolism, reflecting the historical narratives and contemporary issues faced by the communities. Bairner and Shirlow (1998) argue that these murals serve as visual manifestations of collective memory and identity. The political impact of the murals is multifaceted. They not only reflect existing political sentiments but also actively shape them. As Jarman (1998) notes, murals have the power to communicate political messages directly to the community, influencing public opinion and reinforcing ideological positions. During the Troubles, they played a role in sustaining the conflict by perpetuating division and hostility between the nationalist and unionist communities.

For instance, Republican murals frequently portray iconic figures such as Bobby Sands and events like the 1916 Easter Rising, emphasizing themes of sacrifice and liberation. On the other hand, Loyalist murals often depict the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and commemorate battles such as the Battle of the Somme, reinforcing a sense of British heritage and resilience.

RQ1: How political are the murals created during and after the Troubles?

RQ2: How does the location of murals in Belfast correspond with the political message of the mural?

Republican Representation in Murals

Throughout Belfast, I saw a majority of murals, predominantly on the Republican side of the peace walls, that represented Catholic ideals and morals. Republican murals formed part of a “Paint and Poster Campaign” with the goal of creating their own mass media (Crowley, 2022). Particularly after the Hunger Strike of 1981, these murals became a significant medium through which Republicans “countered censorship, constructed political hegemony in Nationalist and Republican areas, and conveyed their message to a wider world” (Crowley, 2022). These murals appealed to a larger audience of Catholics, who realized that they could not only use murals to portray religious symbolism, but also politics, history, and collective memory. Symbols such as the Irish tricolor flag, the harp, and Celtic motifs are common among Catholic murals and emphasize a strong connection to the Republic of Ireland. Along Falls Road and much of West Belfast are numerous murals that send various messages surrounding Catholic and Republican representation in The Troubles and beyond. On Beachmount Avenue in Belfast is a mural of Constance Markievicz, who was the founding member of the Republican Women’s Organization. This mural was painted to commemorate the centenary of their formation. On Glenalina Road in Belfast is a memorial mural that stands to commemorate local Irish Republican Army (IRA) members who lost their lives during the Troubles.



Image 1. Mural commemorating Irish Republican Army (IRA) members, Glenalina Road, West Belfast

Located on Northumberland Street in Belfast is a mural with the word Pobal, which means community in Irish. Pobal was a Belfast-based Irish language group that campaigned for an Irish Language Act for Northern Ireland (Ulster Museum, 2024).



Image 2. Mural promoting the Irish Language Act for Northern Ireland, Northumberland Street, Belfast

Likewise, there are many propaganda posters featured on the Catholic side of the peace walls urging citizens to join certain organizations, such as the Irish Republican National Congress (IRNC) and the Irish Republican Prisoners Committee (IRPC).

Loyalist Representation in Murals

On the other side of the peace walls lies a much different, separated community of Protestants and Loyalists. Similar to the Catholics, this community uses murals as a form of representation and cultural expression. On Percy Place in Belfast is a mural of an armed Loyalist figure with the Ulster Banner and Ulster Volunteer Force flag. This mural read “This is Loyalist

West Belfast” and “Shankill No Surrender”. Many of the Loyalist murals incorporate symbols, such as the Red Hand of Ulster and the Union flag of the United Kingdom, which signifies their loyal British identity. On Newtownards Road in Belfast, there is a mural of a Loyalist woman wearing black sunglasses, which are often used in murals of paramilitaries to conceal identities. There is writing next to the woman that reads “During the conflict our women play an important role supporting our prisoners while also keeping the family unit together” (Ulster Museum, 2024). On Carnan Street in Belfast is a mural of five Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) members on patrol.



Image 3. Mural featuring five Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) members on patrol, Carnan Street, Belfast. This mural stands as a memorial to the dead comrades and reads “Recognition, Appreciation, Remembrance”. On Highpark Drive in Belfast is a mural that depicts an ancient defender of Ulster alongside dedications to the Ulster Deference Association and memorials to the First World War (Ulster Museum, 2024).

Political Impact of Murals

The political impact of the murals is multifaceted. They not only reflect existing political sentiments but also actively shape them. As Jarman (1998) notes, murals have the power to communicate political messages directly to the community, influencing public opinion and reinforcing ideological positions. During the Troubles, they played a role in sustaining the conflict by perpetuating division and hostility between the Republican and Loyalist communities.

Following the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, there has been a noticeable shift in the themes of Belfast murals. Contemporary murals often promote messages of peace, reconciliation, and shared history. According to Gregory (2010), this transition reflects broader societal changes and efforts to move beyond the conflict. However, the legacy of the murals from the Troubles era continues to influence political discourse and community relations in Belfast.

Murals have also become a significant aspect of community identity and cultural heritage. Leonard (2006) discusses how the murals serve as a form of grassroots historiography, allowing communities to narrate their own histories. Moreover, the murals have become a focal point for tourism in Belfast, attracting visitors interested in the region's political history. This dual role as both community art and tourist attraction has economic and social implications, contributing to the ongoing negotiation of identity and memory in Northern Ireland.

RQ3: What types of political messages are depicted in the Loyalist and Republican murals?

Conflict Among Murals

When comparing murals from the Republican and Loyalist side, there is obvious conflict still happening between the two sides. In Republican areas, murals often celebrate Irish heritage, praise the struggles for independence, and honor significant figures who supported the republican movement. On the other hand, Loyalist areas showed murals that depicted British identity, loyalty to the crown, and celebrating the people who side with the United Kingdom in

this conflict. Some murals depict individual members of paramilitary groups or other organizations who significantly participated in the conflict. Others serve as memorials to commemorate victims who were killed during The Troubles. While some murals aim to foster unity and peace, others continue to reinforce the sectarian and religious divisions of the country.

RQ4: How does the association with Britain or Ireland correspond with the location of the mural?

Collective Memory in Murals

Murals in Northern Ireland are often associated with the civil war between Republicans who want independence from the UK and Loyalists who are loyal to the British crown (Germain & Doutre, 2021). Since the early 20th century, they have served as spatial markers separating neighborhoods, thus reinforcing peace lines that divided public spaces. In 1977, the Belfast City Council tried to get involved through the Community Murals Programme with the aim of changing some of the political and controversial themes depicted in current murals. Young artists painted more than forty non-political and non-sectarian murals in various locations in Belfast (Sluka, 1992). However, not all militaristic murals have been removed. Some were preserved for economic reasons associated with tourism and because they commemorate a collective memory (Germain & Doutre, 2021). Remembrance is a very important aspect in the healing process for both communities in terms of preserving their own identities. This phenomenon, which combines the preservation and the removal of murals, demonstrates how a community that has been divided wished to speak about its collective memory in relation to a civil war but also how this discourse evolves over time.

Because of the hardship and trauma the Northern Irish people experienced during The Troubles, it was very important to many families that the young people in the community did not

face this violence on a daily basis. To overcome this violence, the community needed positive elements on these new murals, which would allow them to build a favorable post-conflict identity (Germain & Doutre, 2021). In Shankill Road, the process of heritage is fairly transparent, as they have replaced images of paramilitaries and violence with historical and religious figures and positive values that are representative of their identity. Many murals depicting the Troubles were kept for the purpose of tourism and collective memory.

The murals of Northern Ireland, particularly in Belfast, are more than just artistic expressions; they are powerful political tools that have shaped and continue to shape the political climate of the region. From their origins as symbols of resistance and loyalty during the Troubles to their current role in promoting peace and reconciliation, the murals reflect the evolving nature of Belfast's society. Understanding these murals provides valuable insights into the complexities of Northern Ireland's political landscape and the ongoing process of conflict transformation.

RQ5: What types of non-political messages are depicted in the non-aligned murals in Belfast?

Overall, these murals still remain today as a reminder of The Troubles and the ongoing conflict between Republicans and Loyalists in Northern Ireland. These murals clearly illustrate the complexity of Northern Ireland's history and are a great way to learn about the country and its story, as well as spread awareness to certain political or religious issues. This form of visual storytelling reflects the community's values, struggles, and motives. These murals are more than just works of art; they also serve as political and communal symbols that shape and reflect public opinion.

Methods

Samples

The current study sampled a total of 93 murals, consisting of 30 Loyalist, 31 Republican, and 32 non-aligned murals. The years of these murals range from 1977 to 2019. Some limiting criteria of this dataset include only coding murals in the city of Belfast. The reason the dataset focused on murals in Belfast is because this city has the largest number of murals in Northern Ireland, with an estimated 700 murals (Poole & Thompson, 2019) 300 being high-quality, excellent condition murals (CCHAdmin, 2024). Murals in Belfast are significant since they have evolved to mirror societal and political changes which are prominent in the city's landscape.

Procedures

To select the study sample, the '*Murals of Northern Ireland*' collection from 'The Claremont Colleges Digital Library' database was used (Crowley, 2021). This database was selected because it demonstrates an archive of murals, street art, graffiti, and memorials from Northern Ireland – Nationalist, Republican, Unionist, Loyalist, and non-aligned – which appeared during the Troubles and the post-conflict period (1979-2020). The collection contains around 20,000 personal photographs taken by Dr. Tony Crowley of murals in Northern Ireland.

To ensure an unbiased dataset was gathered, a stratified random sampling method was used. Stratified random sampling refers to a method of sampling that involves the division of a population into smaller subgroups known as strata (Hayes, 2024). In this case, the strata are Loyalist, Republican, and non-aligned, which all share the similar attribute of being mural types. The stratified random sampling technique selected every fifth mural (6%) from the database from 1968 to 2019. This year range was selected because it contains the time during the Troubles (1968-1998) as well as the post conflict period. Since only murals in Belfast were selected, the first mural coded was from 1977.

Measures

The coding sheet includes 10 variables, which are ID, mural type, location of the mural (city), location of the mural (% Catholic), date created, is the message political, type of message, meaning of the message, an association with Britain or Ireland, and association memo. The first variable, ID, is numbered 1 through 100, with numbers 8, 9, 10, 20, 24, 44, and 63 missing as they contained murals from cities other than Belfast, which were unable to be coded. The second variable, mural type, used 1 to represent Republican murals, 2 to represent Loyalist murals, and 3 to represent non-aligned murals. The third variable, the location of the mural, used 1 to represent Belfast. In order to precisely determine the geographic location of each mural, a **Religious Distribution in Belfast Map** (Johnson, 2001) (see **Appendix**) was used to show the proportion of Roman Catholics in each of Belfast's Electoral Wards. The built-up areas of each Ward are color-coded to give an indication of the proportion: 0 to 20% Catholic, 21-40% Catholic, 41 to 60 % Catholic, 61 to 80% Catholic, and 81 to 100% Catholic, which are coded in variable four. Variable five, date created, spans from 1977 to 2019.

Variable six asks the question 'Is the message political?', coded as 1-Yes, 2-No. Variable seven has the message typed in, using the mural photograph and description from the database. The message is then categorized in variable eight using 11 categories: 1- Commemoration, 2- Historical events, 3- Support for political organizations, 4- Support for community organizations, 5- Call to action message, 6- Portrait / solidarity of political figure, 7- Welcoming to certain area, 8- Depicting well-known and respected sporting, literary and artistic figures from Northern Ireland, 9-Message of peace, 10- Music and entertainment, 11- Art. The ninth variable portrays a scale showing the association with Britain or Ireland: 1- Strong association with Britain, 2-Slight association with Britain, 3- Neutral association, 4- Slight association with Ireland, 5- Strong association with Ireland. The tenth variable, association

memo, explains specific symbols and characters that show British, Irish, or neutral association. Some examples of these symbols are the Union Jack, Red Hand of Ulster, Tricolor flag, Celtic decorations, four shields of the Provinces of Ireland, orange lilies, and red poppies.

Intercoder Reliability

In order to ensure high intercoder reliability, research assistant Mallory Ramsay was recruited to code 11 of the 93 murals. Ramsay spent time in Northern Ireland during the summer of 2024 and has prior knowledge on Loyalist, Republican, and non-aligned murals from seeing them first-hand around Belfast. First, I discussed with Ramsay the procedures, including explaining the database and each variable that she will be coding. Next, I displayed 11 murals – 4 Republican, 4 Loyalist, and 3 non-aligned – for her to code. Using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29), and Reliability Analysis, I was able to determine the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC), which is a statistical measure used to assess intercoder reliability, for the variables that could prove differences between coders. These variables are the location of the mural, inclusion of political message, the message's meaning, and its association with Britain or Ireland. The other variables did not need to be measured for intercoder reliability because they were taken directly from the database, therefore resulted in no differences between coders.

The ICC provides a range from 0 to 1, where typically strong agreement is > 0.75 . The Cohen's kappa coefficient was examined using SPSS to ensure high intercoder reliability. For the mural's location, the ICC was 0.725; for the political message, the ICC was 1.0; for the message meaning, the ICC was 1.0; and for the association with Britain or Ireland, the ICC was 0.97. These findings show that there is generally strong agreement between coders. Overall, there was high intercoder reliability among both coders for this study.

Results

At the end of the data collection, 93 murals were coded, ranging from Loyalist representation, Republican representation, and non-aligned representation. Using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29), the dataset was able to be entered and coded. SPSS determined that 30 of the 93 murals were 0-20% Catholic, 14 were 21-40% Catholic, 7 were 41-60% Catholic, and 42 were 81-100% Catholic. Out of the 93 murals coded, 56 murals were coded as ‘Yes’ for “Is the message political?”, and 37 murals were coded as ‘No’ for “Is the message political?”. For the message variable, 28 murals were coded as ‘commemoration’, 6 murals were coded as ‘historical events’, 11 murals were coded as ‘support of political organization’, 14 murals were coded as ‘support for community organization’, 11 murals were coded as ‘call to action message’, 5 murals were coded as ‘portrait/support of political figure’, 3 murals were coded as ‘welcoming to certain area’, 1 mural was coded as ‘sporting, literary, and artistic figures of Northern Ireland’, 6 murals were coded as ‘message of peace’, and 8 murals were coded as ‘music, entertainment, and art’. For the association with Britain or Ireland, 22 murals were coded as ‘strong association with Britain’, 7 murals were coded as ‘slight association with Britain’, 30 murals were coded as ‘neutral association’, 7 murals were coded as ‘slight association with Ireland’, and 27 murals were coded as ‘strong association with Ireland’.

To answer **RQ1**, “How political are the murals created during and after the Troubles?”, it is important to note that there were significantly more murals created after the Troubles than during the Troubles. As shown in **Table 1** and **Graph 1** in the **Appendix**, 11 murals coded were created during the Troubles (1968-1998), with 81.8% of the messages being political and 18.2% being not political. There were 81 murals coded that were created after the Troubles (1999-2019), with 58% of the messages being political and 42% being not political. By visualizing the data in terms of percentages, it is clear to see that as time progressed, the murals throughout

Belfast are becoming less and less political. A Chi-square test was performed to determine if the p-value is less than 0.005, meaning the result is statically significant. When comparing murals during the Troubles (1968-1998) to murals soon after the Troubles (1999-2012), and a decade after the Troubles (2013-2024) with the frequency of political messages, the Chi-Square Test yielded significant results $\chi^2 (2, N = 93) = 9.638, p = 0.008$. This means there is a significant difference in the frequencies of the political messages in murals during and after the Troubles. Specifically, it means that there were more political murals during the Troubles, and since 2013, or a decade after the Troubles, there have been more non-political messages shown in the murals in Belfast.

While previous murals mainly contained messages of commemoration, historical events, or support of political organizations, more recent non-political murals focus on messages of peace, music and entertainment, art, and depicting well-known and respected sporting, literary, and artistic figures from Northern Ireland. This shift in messages from highly political to art and community-focused suggests that Belfast is working towards bringing together Loyalist and Republican members in an attempt to eliminate the divide between the two groups and move away from political division.

To answer **RQ2**: “How does the location of murals in Belfast correspond with the political message of the mural?”, I used IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29) to analyze the crosstabulation between location and political association of the murals. As shown in **Table 2** of the **Appendix**, 48.2% of the murals that were coded ‘yes’ for ‘Is the message political?’ were located in low Catholic areas, or highly Protestant in this case (0-40% Catholic), and 48.2% of murals that were coded ‘yes’ for ‘Is the message political?’ were located in highly Catholic areas (61% or more Catholic). On the opposite end, 47.2% of murals that were coded ‘no’ for ‘Is this

message political?’ were located in low Catholic areas (0-40% Catholic), and 38.9% of murals that were coded ‘no’ were located in highly Catholic areas (61% or more Catholic). The result of this crosstabulation was fairly consistent with Loyalist and Republican murals being located in predominantly Loyalist or Republican areas. This finding emphasizes the continuous political divide in Belfast, where murals are still used as a form of political and sectarian expression. Although the overall political content of these murals has decreased over time, the location and political association of murals serves as a constant reminder of the city’s historical divides.

To answer **RQ3**: “What types of political messages are depicted in the Loyalist and Republican murals?”, I was able to determine which message type was most likely associated with which type of mural through visual analysis. When analyzing Loyalist murals, the most common messages were commemoration (33.3%), support of political organization (30%), and support for community organization (20%). The most common messages for Republican murals were commemoration (41.9%), call to action message (19.4%), and historical events (12.9%) (see **Table 3** in **Appendix**). These results suggest that the meanings are strongly correlated to the underlying message of each mural type: Loyalist murals primarily reinforce political loyalty and British identity, and Republican murals focus on action-oriented messages and positivity around the community. Both Loyalist and Republican groups use murals as a tool to express messages of political loyalty and to promote political, religious, or community allegiance.

To answer **RQ4**: “How does the association with Britain or Ireland correspond with the location of the mural?”, 100% of murals that were coded as strong association with Britain were located in areas of Belfast that are 0-40% Catholic. For murals that were coded as neutral association, 50% of the murals were located in areas of Belfast that are 0-40% Catholic, 13.3% of the murals were located in areas of Belfast that are 50% Catholic, and 36.7% of the murals

were located in areas of Belfast that are 61% or more Catholic. For murals that were coded as strong association with Ireland, 88.9% of the murals were located in areas of Belfast that are 61% or more Catholic (see **Table 4** in **Appendix**). These findings were expected due to the fact that Loyalist murals were primarily located in less Catholic areas and Republican murals were primarily located in more Catholic areas. This result confirms that location and political identity still influence the murals' symbolism and meaning.

To answer **RQ5**: “What types of non-political messages are depicted in the non-aligned murals in Belfast?”, it is important to understand the reasoning behind many of the non-aligned murals that are being created in Belfast. Through visual analysis, I was able to determine that the most common message meanings for non-aligned murals were messages of peace, music entertainment and art, and support for community organization, which aligns with the notion of re-imagining and creating a more welcoming environment for everyone. One non-aligned mural in particular that stood out was ID 28, located in a highly Catholic neighborhood. An article from the Belfast Telegraph (Belfast Telegraph, 2009) explains that a former paramilitary mural has been replaced by one depicting well-known and respected sporting, literary, and artistic figures from Northern Ireland.



Image 4. Mural depicting well-known and respected sporting, literary and artistic figures from Northern Ireland. Alliance Road. North Belfast

According to the author, the wall formerly contained UVF murals but was repainted as a part of the joint Arts Council and Belfast City Council Re-Imaging Communities Programme. The Lord Mayor of Belfast, Naomi Long, described the project as “a symbol of communities moving towards a peaceful and brighter future, not forgetting the past but looking forward” (Belfast Telegraph, 2009). The re-imaging efforts have continued around Belfast as a way to create new public artwork and build a future for Northern Ireland that is founded on partnership, equality, and mutual respect. Overall, the increasing prevalence of peaceful and inclusive messages in non-aligned murals reflects a societal shift towards reconciliation, contributing to the promotion of harmony and respect for each other after years of division and conflict.

Discussion

Interpretation of Key Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how murals in Belfast, Northern Ireland illustrate the political and sectarian conflict by analyzing Loyalist, Republican, and non-aligned murals and the various messages and meanings represented in these murals. To interpret the key findings, I analyzed the results of each RQ as well as other noticeable trends and patterns. The results indicate a clear shift in the political content of murals over time, with a notable decrease in political content following the end of the Troubles. Murals created during the Troubles (1968-1998) were predominantly political (81.8% political messages vs. 18.2% non-political), whereas murals created after the Troubles (1999-2019) showed a substantial increase in non-political content, with 58% carrying political messages and 42% non-political messages. This transition suggests a movement toward more community-focused and artistic expressions, with themes such as peace, art, and cultural figures becoming more prevalent in recent years.

This study also found that political murals were found to be located in areas of Belfast with strong Loyalist or Republican affiliations. Specifically, murals coded as political were evenly split between low Catholic (Protestant-majority) and high Catholic (Republican-majority) neighborhoods, indicating that mural content still largely aligns with the political identity of the area. Loyalist murals tended to focus on commemoration, support for political organizations, and British identity, while Republican murals often centered on commemoration, historical events, and call to action messages, while emphasizing Irish nationalism. Non-aligned murals, in contrast, most frequently carried messages of peace, support for community organizations, and cultural and artistic representations, reflecting efforts to foster unity and mutual respect through public art. Additionally, murals' association with Britain or Ireland also correlated with their location: murals with a strong association with Britain were found primarily in areas with low Catholic distribution, while murals with a strong association with Ireland were located in areas with high Catholic distribution, reinforcing the ongoing political and sectarian divides in Belfast. In recent years, there has been a large shift towards replacing old sectarian and violent artwork with messages that don't concern Loyalists or Republicans in an attempt to establish peace, welcome tourists, and transform Belfast's urban landscape (McCaffery, 2017). Overall, the data underscores the role of murals as both a reflection of Belfast's historical divisions and a medium for post-conflict reconciliation, with clear movement toward reducing overtly political content in favor of more inclusive, peace-oriented messages.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the results of this study. First, the sample size and selection were somewhat small, with only 93 murals being coded out of around 1,200 Loyalist, Republican, and non-aligned murals found on the database (Crowley,

2021). A small sample size may have limited the generalizability of the findings and may not represent the full spectrum of mural expressions, political themes, and narratives present across the city. Another limitation of this research study was the sample size only including murals from Belfast and no other cities around Northern Ireland, such as Derry and Newtownards. This is due to the fact that no religious distribution map was able to be found for other cities, therefore limiting the sample size. This exclusion limits the range of murals being coded and leaves out the different political messages and themes that may be present in murals from other cities.

Directions for future studies

Future research could build upon the findings of this study in several key ways. First, expanding the sample size to include a broader range of murals around Belfast would provide a more comprehensive view of Loyalist, Republican, and non-aligned murals in the city. Also, the current study solely focuses on murals in Belfast, so future research could aim to understand how political and non-political murals are situated around Northern Ireland as a whole, and how the messages differ from city to city. Exploring the murals from other cities around the country would capture a broader variety of mural expressions, themes, and artistic styles and allow researchers to reflect on trends present throughout these murals.

Also, future research could explore the impact of murals on the local community. For example, future studies could conduct surveys or interviews with local residents to assess the social impact of murals. Hearing first-hand stories from local community members will give a better understanding of the re-imaging efforts of political murals, and the community's opinion on non-aligned murals replacing highly political Loyalist and Republican messages. This direction could contribute to how murals around Northern Ireland function as a tool for collective memory, social change, and messages of peacebuilding as opposed to political division.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study offers a thorough analysis of how murals illustrate Northern Ireland's political and sectarian conflict through political and non-political messages. By analyzing 93 murals, the results show that while the majority of the murals created during the Troubles (1968-1998) are political and reflect the deeply rooted conflict between Loyalist and Republican communities, post-Troubles murals have shifted towards non-political messages, with an emphasis on peace, community, and cultural expression. This movement from highly political to non-political murals reflects larger societal initiatives to ease historical tensions and promote a more inclusive future of Belfast and Northern Ireland.

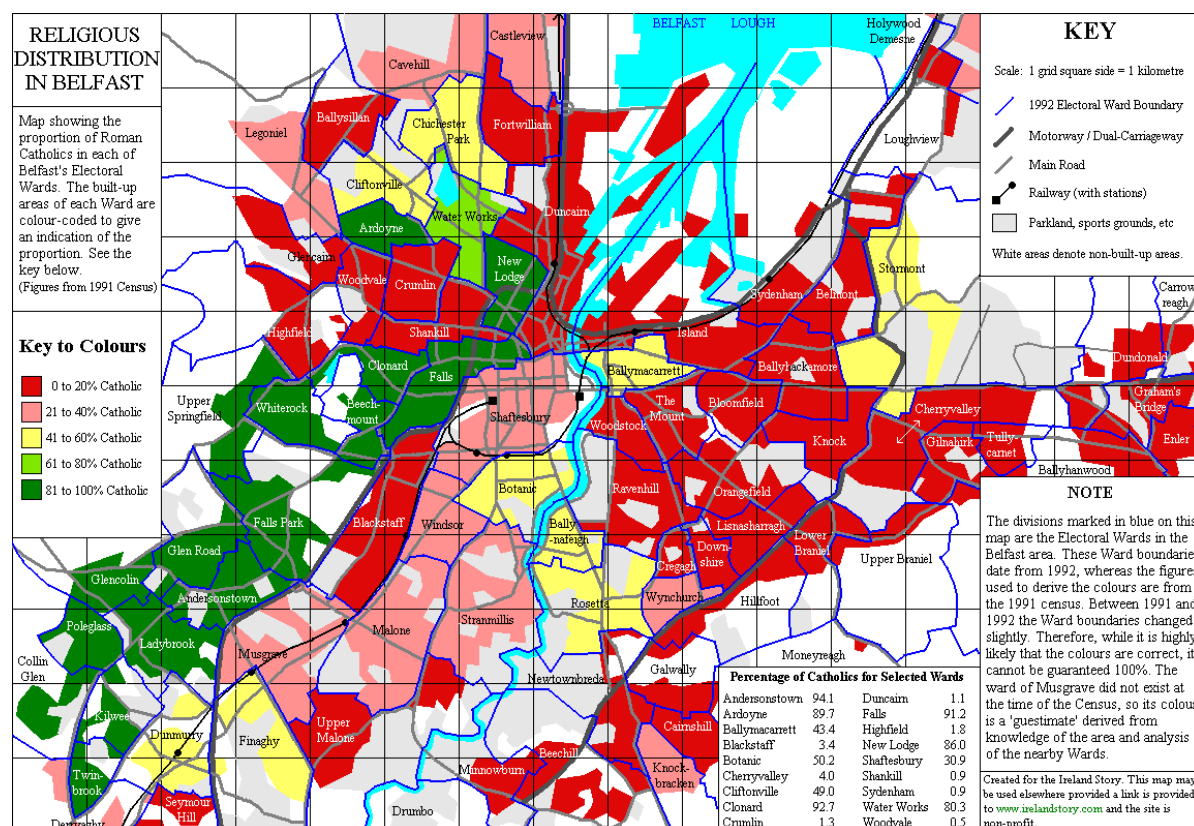
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Appendix

Religious Distribution Map of Belfast-



Johnson, W. (2001) *Religious Distribution Map of Belfast* [Map] Retrieved from October 2, 2024 from https://www.wesleyjohnston.com/users/ireland/maps/towns/belfast_religion.gif

Table 1: Mural Date Compared to Political Message

		Is the message political?		Total
		Yes	No	
Murals created during the Troubles (1968-1998)	Count	9	2	11
	% of murals created during the Troubles	81.8%	18.2%	100.0%
	% of Total	9.8%	2.2%	12.0%
Murals created after the Troubles (1998-2019)	Count	47	35	82
	% of murals created after the Troubles	58.0%	42.0%	100.0%
	% of Total	51.1%	37.0%	88.0%
Total	Count	56	37	93
	% of Total	60.9%	39.1%	100.0%

Table 2: Inclusion of Political Messages in Murals based on the Location ratio of Catholic Residents

		0 to 40% Catholic	50% Catholic	61% or more Catholic	Total
Is the message political? Yes	Count	27	2	27	56
	% compared to location of Catholic affiliation	48.2%	3.6%	48.2%	100.0%
	No				
	Count	17	5	15	36
	% compared to location of Catholic affiliation	47.2%	13.9%	38.9%	100.0%
Total	Count	44	7	41	92
	% of Total	47.8%	7.6%	44.6%	100.0%

Table 3: Mural Type (Republican or Loyalist) Compared to Message

								Total
			Commemoration	Historical events	Support of political organization	Support for community organization	Call to action message	
Mural type	Republican	Count	13	4	3	3	6	31
		% within Republican murals	41.9%	12.9%	9.7%	9.7%	19.4%	100.0 %
	Loyalist	Count	10	1	9	6	1	30
		% within Loyalist murals	33.3%	3.3%	30.0%	20.0%	3.3%	100.0 %

Table 4: Association with Britain or Ireland Compared to the Mural's Location in Belfast

			Location by Catholic %			
			0 to 40% Catholic	50% Catholic	61% or more Catholic	Total
Association with Britian or Ireland	Strong association with Britain	Count	22	0	0	22
		% within Association with Britian or Ireland	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
	Neutral association	Count	15	4	11	30
		% within Association with Britian or Ireland	50.0%	13.3%	36.7%	100.0%
	Strong association with Ireland	Count	2	1	24	27
		% within Association with Britian or Ireland	7.4%	3.7%	88.9%	100.0%
Total		Count	44	7	42	93
		% of Total	47.3%	7.5%	45.2%	100.0%

Graph 1: