"They are deconstructing the city": A typology of media narratives on tactical urbanism

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Abstract

The present article examines the role of the media in (re)producing positive and negative discourses on tactical urbanism, through a case study of recent tactical urbanism measures in Barcelona. To this end, the article analyses 106 news items on tactical urbanism, published in two newspapers with contrasting ideological viewpoints. Through an inductive coding process, I map arguments put forward in favour of or against tactical interventions, and identify five main narrative frames on tactical urbanism (three negative and two positive): 1) "Disorder and decadence"; 2) "The war on cars"; 3) "Strangling the city; 4) "The new hygienism"; and 5) "Reclaiming the street". Negative frames criticise tactical urbanism primarily on aesthetic and procedural grounds, while positive frames tend to justify it through appeals to public health. In the Discussion, I suggest that emphasising the experimental nature of tactical urbanism might contribute to mitigate the polarisation of media frames on the topic.

Keywords: tactical urbanism; street space; frame analysis; media narratives; Barcelona; superblocks

1 Introduction

Amidst a growing societal consensus that motorised vehicles are overprivileged in urban space (Creutzig et al. 2020; Montgomery 2013; Nieuwenhuijsen and Khreis 2016; Nello-Deakin 2019), municipal administrations are attempting to overturn decades of car-centric planning by reallocating street space to active travel and public space (Petzer et al. 2021). Since the COVID-19 pandemic such initiatives have multiplied, often through temporary interventions referred to as "tactical urbanism" (Rojas-Rueda and Morales-Zamora 2021). However, measures which reduce the space dedicated to motorised vehicles often cause substantial backlash. Although research has shown that fears related to negative impacts on traffic and local businesses are often unfounded (Chung et al. 2012; Nello-Deakin 2022; Yoshimura et al. 2022), these perceptions continue to be a barrier to the implementation of such schemes. Indeed, the success of tactical urbanism and traffic reduction schemes depends as much on media and public narratives, as on their impacts on the ground (Melia and Calvert 2021; Sadik-Khan and Solomonow 2016).

Given the role of the media in producing and amplifying discourses which might lead to the success or defeat of road space reduction proposals, understanding how media outlets portray tactical urbanism offers valuable lessons for planners and policymakers. With this goal in mind, **the present article assesses media portrayals of recent tactical urbanism interventions in Barcelona** through a qualitative analysis of 106 news articles, published in Catalonia's two main newspapers. In the article, I map arguments for and against tactical urbanism, and identify five main narrative frames through which tactical urbanism is portrayed.

This focus echoes previous research examining how the media frames local planning issues (e.g. Dessouky and Wheeler 2022; Iping et al. 2019; Sánchez Vergara et

al. 2021), including urban mobility projects (Béland 2014; Vigar et al. 2011). Media framing of planning issues can highlight specific dimensions while marginalising others, and often plays an important role in influencing how they are perceived and discussed by the public (Dessouky and Wheeler 2022; Grant, Derksen and Ramos 2019). Likewise, mass media can contribute to increase consensus between sociodemographic groups regarding key public agenda issues (Shaw and Martin, 1992). For these reasons, I argue that examining media frames on tactical urbanism is not a frivolous exercise, but one which offers relevant lessons for urban planners and designers. In particular, identifying and understanding *negative* media frames on tactical urbanism might help pre-empt critical voices, and guide the future implementation of such schemes in a way that minimises popular backlash.

I begin the article by introducing existing research on tactical urbanism, and provide some context on the recent interventions implemented in Barcelona; this is followed by the Methods section. In the Results, I provide an overview of aggregate trends for the analysed newspaper items, followed by the results of the coding process and identified media frames. In the Discussion, I review the main findings and reflect on their implications for policy and research.

1.1   *The rise of tactical urbanism*

Since the popularisation of the term by Lydon et al. (2015) and Sadik-Khan and Solomonow (2016), "tactical urbanism" has become a popular label to refer to a variety of urban interventions characterised by their swift implementation, low cost, and temporary character. While tactical urbanism was originally associated to grassroots initiatives (i.e. "guerrilla" urbanism), more recently the term has been used by public administrations themselves as a label to refer to temporary or experimental interventions which deviate from conventional planning practices (Finn 2014).

Although tactical urbanism has attracted increasing attention in recent years, the literature on the topic is fragmented across various disciplines, a tendency which is exacerbated by the lack of a common definition. Although most research has focused on critically assessing tactical urbanism from the viewpoint of planning theory (e.g. Silva 2016; Stevens et al. 2021; Webb 2018), studies from disciplines such as place-making have examined the topic from a more practice-oriented perspective (e.g. Lak and Zarezadeh Kheibari 2020). However, there appears to be little research on tactical urbanism from an urban mobility perspective, beyond frequent mention of tactical urbanism as a promising strategy to increase active travel and reduce car use, particularly in the wake of COVID-19 (Rojas-Rueda and Morales-Zamora 2021). As an exception, Sargisson et al. (2022) examined public perceptions of mobility-related tactical interventions in New Zealand, but as far as I am aware of no further studies have studied public or media perceptions of mobility-related tactical interventions. As highlighted by Sargisson et al. (2022), interventions which restrict car circulation or parking are among those most likely to cause backlash, but it is unclear whether these negative reactions are representative of the broader population.

1.2   *Tactical urbanism in Barcelona*

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (spring 2020), the municipality of Barcelona undertook various emergency tactical urbanism interventions to facilitate social distancing and promote active travel. These interventions included temporary street closures, new tactical sidewalks and bike paths, and the installation of cafe terraces at the expense of on-street car parking (Figure 1). While these measures were originally pitched as temporary, many of them have since been made maintained (at least until their redesign using permanent elements). While the most substantial interventions took place in the central *Eixample* district, various smaller interventions (e.g. cafe terraces)

were distributed throughout the whole city. Figure 2 reproduces the map produced by the municipality to announce the main tactical interventions carried out during the pandemic.

As a case study, the recent tactical urbanism measures in Barcelona are interesting not only because of the city's widely regarded status as a forerunner in urban design and mobility policy (Mueller et al., 2020), but also because of the virulence with which these measures have been criticised by the local media, political opposition and business establishment. Since the election of ex-housing activist Ada Colau as mayor in 2015 as part of a left-wing citizen platform, the local government has pursued a public municipalist agenda explicitly opposing local housing, tourism and car lobbies (Barcelona en Comú 2019). This political backdrop is important to understand the prominence of negative political and media discourses on tactical urbanism: at least in part, negative coverage of tactical urbanism (and related projects such as the "superblocks" plan) can be interpreted as an effort from the political opposition to undermine the current municipal leadership. These attacks have not been confined to the local press, but have also attracted a judicial offensive against tactical interventions which has been described as a form of "urban lawfare" (Montaner 2023).

Although the focus of my article is restricted to tactical interventions from 2020 onwards (when the term "tactical urbanism" was first used by the municipality), these measures build on earlier interventions which made use of tactical elements – most notably the "superblocks" in the neighbourhoods of Poblenou and Sant Antoni – and can be inscribed within pre-existing long-term traffic reduction strategies. This means that although my analysis focuses primarily on tactical urbanism measures implemented since 2020, it may also be seen as partially representative of broader media narratives on car reduction policies.

Figure 1: Examples of various tactical urbanism measures implemented since 2020
(Source: Author)

Figure 2: Main emergency tactical interventions announced by the Municipality of Barcelona in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Source: Municipality of Barcelona)

2   Methods

My analysis is based on 106 news articles discussing tactical urbanism measures in Barcelona, published between April 2020 and May 2022 in the newspapers *La Vanguardia* and *El Periódico*. Both these publications are headquartered in Barcelona and constitute the two most widely circulated newspapers in Catalonia. *La Vanguardia*'s ideological positioning is centrist with moderate views in tune with the local bourgeoisie, while *el Periódico* tends to adopt a centre-left stance. My choice to focus the analysis on two newspapers with contrasting ideological positions follows in the footsteps of Lipovsky (2021), who used this method to analyse the representation of free-floating e-scooters in France. As argued in her article, "because of the significance of discursive construction in positioning environmental and societal issues, the most productive sample was deemed to consist of newspapers of contrasting ideological views. This is because such papers are likely to shape public opinions and beliefs in distinct ways" (Lipovsky 2021, 3).

To identify eligible articles, I searched for items containing the term "tactical urbanism" in the online database *MyNews*, which provides access to the full-text archive of most Spanish newspapers. To avoid duplication of results, this search focused on print articles only, which I deemed to provide a more reliable record than online articles. Since *La Vanguardia* and *El Periódico* publish editions with identical content both in Catalan and Spanish, I restricted the search to the Catalan edition. This initial search led to a total of 126 articles. After scanning all articles for relevance, this figure was reduced to 106 articles (67 in La Vanguardia and 39 in *El Periódico*). This set of articles includes not only news stories, but also opinion pieces, editorials, and letters to the editor. Although my search included the whole period between the start of 2019 until the end of May 2022, the first news item containing the expression "tactical urbanism" was only published at the end of April 2020.

In order to identify main themes and discourses on tactical urbanism, I qualitatively coded all news items. This coding process focused on identifying instances of positive and negative appreciation of tactical urbanism, seeking to systematise the main reasons put forward in favour of or against the implementation of tactical urbanism. This focus on positive/negative appreciation also replicates the approach used by Lipovsky (2021).

I inductively derived individual codes from news items, with each code referring to a distinct reason for evaluating tactical urbanism measures positively or negatively. I refined these codes iteratively, classifying them into two overarching categories ("positive" and "negative"). Furthermore, I classified each news item according to the following criteria, which mirror those used in previous studies focusing on media portrayals of transport issues (Rye et al. 2008; Vigar et al. 2011):

- **Overall portrayal** (positive/negative/neutral or mixed): This category refers to the whether the portrayal of tactical urbanism in each news item is predominantly positive or negative. While most articles clearly portrayed tactical urbanism either favourably or unfavourably, a small number of articles contained mixed appreciations or no value judgements at all: I have classified these as *neutral or mixed*.

- **Type of item** (news story/opinion/editorial/letter): This category refers to the type of newspaper item. The *letter* category refers to letters to the editor, while the *opinion* category refers to signed opinion columns. The *editorial* category includes items which explicitly reflect the position of the newspaper; finally, the *news story* category includes all articles which are presented as regular news items or reports.

- **Source of authority** (editorial/expert/personal/politicians, etc.): This refers to the person, collective, or other authority (e.g. social media, survey) whose views on tactical urbanism are presented. In many cases this is the own author of the piece (classified as *personal*, typically in the case of opinion articles or letters), while in others it is the editorial voice of the newspaper itself (classified as *editorial*). In the form of direct or indirect quotes, many articles also include appraisals from *politicians*, *experts*, *organisations*, or *residents*.

Finally, and drawing upon the set of approaches referred to as frame analysis (Vliegenthart and Zoonen 2011; van Hulst and Yanow 2014), I explored how individual positive and negative codes coalesce into overarching narrative frames. While there exist many competing definitions and theorisations of frame analysis (see Sánchez Vergara et al. (2021) for a useful overview), my approach can be seen as adhering to Rein and Schön's (1996) understanding of frames as "strong and generic narratives that

guide both analysis and action in practical situations. These narratives are diagnostic/prescriptive stories that tell, within a given issue terrain, what needs fixing and how it might be fixed" (Rein and Schön 1996, 5). In turn, frame analysis can be situated within broader set of research methods usually referred to as (critical) discourse analysis (Fairclough 2013). The relevance of discourse analysis for urban studies has been argued by Hastings (1999) and more recently by Jacobs (2006), who provides a useful overview of discourse analysis in urban policy research.

My approach also draws also direct inspiration from Lamb et al. (2020), whose article identifies a typology of main "discourses of climate delay". Following their example, I do not seek to provide an in-depth frame or discourse analysis (e.g. by exploring in detail the role of different political actors and interests in promoting different frames), but limit myself to identifying and characterising dominant media frames on tactical urbanism. While not necessarily comprehensive, the resulting typology of media frames is intended to be straightforward and intuitive, and offers a useful heuristic which allows to rapidly identify common arguments put forward in opposition to (or in support of) tactical urbanism measures.

3   Results

3.1   *Overall trends*

As displayed in Figure 3, the first mention of tactical urbanism in both *La Vanguardia* and *El Periódico* dates from April 2020. The number of news items on tactical urbanism peaked in the early autumn of 2020 and has since diminished, but the topic has retained a steady presence in both newspapers. Throughout the whole period, items discussing tactical urbanism have been more frequent in *La Vanguardia* than in *el Periódico*, with the former publication accounting for 63% of all articles.
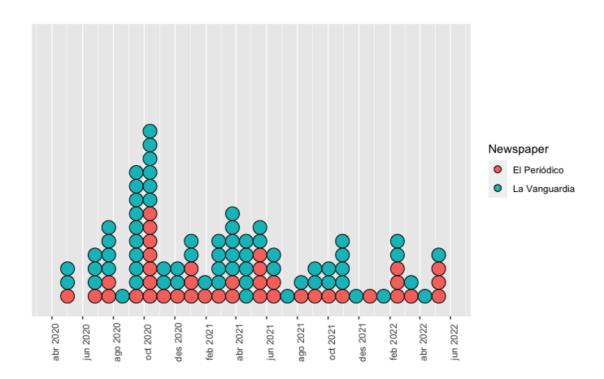
Figure 3: Timeline of news items on tactical urbanism (April 2020-May 2022). Each circle represents an individual news item.

As shown in Figure 4, tactical urbanism is presented in an overwhelmingly negative light in *La Vanguardia*, while in *El Periódico* the tone of most stories is neutral or moderately positive. News items from *La Vanguardia* tend to adopt a more partisan stance which explicitly reflects the point of view of car drivers and is opposed to tactical urbanism, while articles in *El Periódico* usually adopt a more neutral stance by giving voice to both favourable and negative arguments. This difference in framing is reflected in the adjectives used: while *El Periódico* often refers to tactical urbanism as "controversial", "polarising" or "polemic", various articles in *La Vanguardia* depict it as "ridiculous", "horrendous", or "nonsensical".
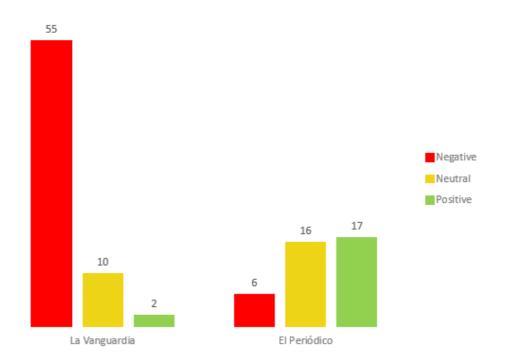

Figure 4: Overall portrayal of tactical urbanism measures by newspaper (n=106)

Table 1 offers further details on the type of analysed news items, classified by newspaper and their portrayal of tactical urbanism. It is worth noting the prominence of negative editorial and opinion articles in *La Vanguardia*, which confirm that the newspaper has pursued a strong editorial stance against tactical urbanism.

Table 1: Type of news items by newspaper and overall portrayal of tactical urbanism

Type of item	Negative	Neutral or mixed	Positive	Total
Editorial	**16**	**2**	**1**	**19**
El Periódico	2	2	1	5
La Vanguardia	14			14
Interview		**1**	**1**	**2**
El Periódico		1	1	2
Letter	**4**		**1**	**5**
El Periódico	1		1	2
La Vanguardia	3			3
News	**23**	**21**	**13**	**57**
El Periódico	3	13	11	28
La Vanguardia	20	8	2	30
Opinion	**18**	**2**	**3**	**23**
El Periódico			3	3
La Vanguardia	18	2		20
Total	**61**	**26**	**29**	**106**

Finally, Table 2 lists the main sources of authority whose views on tactical urbanism are portrayed in each article. The most common source of authority is the personal opinion of the author, followed by appraisals by local politicians, and judgements which reflect the editorial stance of the newspaper. Very few articles give voice to the opinions of residents living near tactical urbanism interventions. This suggests that predominant media discourses amplify the viewpoints of politicians, newspaper contributors, and the editorial view of the newspaper, rather than reflect the views of residents or the population at large.

Table 2: Sources of authority mentioned in the analysed newspaper items.

Authority	Number of instances
Personal opinion	29
Politicians	25
Editorial	18
Experts	11
Business organisations	4
Judiciary/ombudsman	4
Social media	4
Motorist organisations	2
Residents	2
Municipal staff	1

3.2   *Codes*

Tables 3 and 4 present the results of the coding process. Each code corresponds to a distinct argument in support or in opposition of tactical urbanism: Table 3 lists negative codes, while Table 4 lists positive codes. These tables provide a brief explanation of each code, as well as an illustrative direct quotation from a specific news item[1]. Figures 5 (negative codes) and 6 (positive codes) summarise the number of news items in which each code was found to be present.
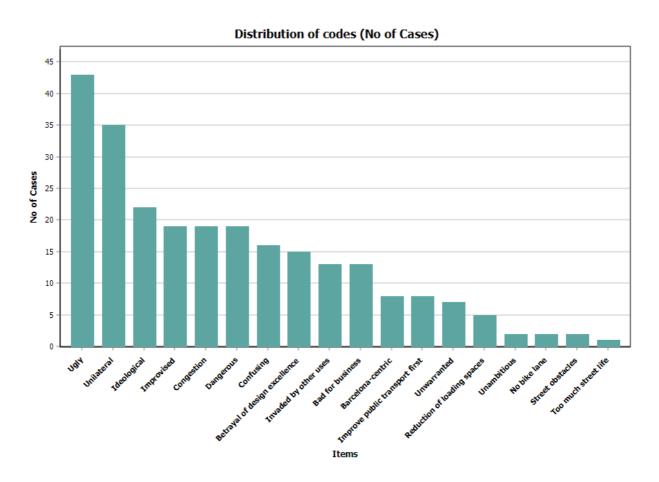

Figure 5: Negative codes on tactical urbanism (n=106)

[1] All quotations have been translated from Catalan; where quotation marks are present, it is because they were already present in the original news item and refer to a direct quotation from a specific person.

Table 3: Negative codes on tactical urbanism

Code	Explanation	Example
Ugly	Tactical urbanism measures are ugly, garish, or unsightly.	It also goes without saying that the spectacle is grotesquely ugly, unworthy even of a school playground. (La Vanguardia, 23/7/2020)
Unilateral	The problem with tactical urbanism is not its aims, but its unilateral implementation	There has not been enough dialogue from municipality. The aims are well-intentioned, but in many cases the implementation has not been correct. (La Vanguardia, 14/19/2020)
Ideological	Tactical urbanism is excessively ideological and is driven by a dogmatic or populist "anti-car" obsession	The aim is purely ideological: [tactical urbanism] tries to destroy the mobility of Barcelona based on private vehicles… (La Vanguardia, 8/3/2021)
Improvised	Tactical urbanism is excessively hasty and improvised, and cannot be considered serious planning	It is not the strategy… which is in question, but the way in which these interventions have been implemented, permeated by hastiness and improvisation… (El Periódico, 4/10/2020)
Dangerous	Tactical urbanism constitutes a traffic danger for motorists, pedestrians or cyclists	"Tactical urbanism is a risk for traffic safety" … (La Vanguardia, 22/10/2020)
Congestion	Tactical urbanism increases traffic congestion, which may indirectly also increase traffic pollution	…so-called tactical urbanism has complicated traffic circulation, increasing travel times and therefore also the emissions which it purportedly aims to reduce… (La Vanguardia, 22/10/2021)
Confusing	Tactical urbanism is difficult to interpret or navigate	"Am I supposed to interpret who is meant to use this space? Is it for pedestrians, old people, cyclists?" (El Periódico, 12/7/2020)
Betrayal of design excellence	Tactical urbanism betrays Barcelona's tradition of urban design excellence	Various Italian architects confessed to me some time ago their admiration for the quality of public space in Barcelona… Well, this exemplary and masterly historical legacy is now being humiliated and mutilated by this ensemble of unreflective interventions. (La Vanguardia, 16/7/2020)
Invaded by other uses	Tactical urbanism doesn't work, since the new tactical sidewalks are invaded by vehicles	The result is an undeniable failure: [tactical sidewalks] are empty or and invaded by cyclists; when possible, they are used for loading and unloading. (La Vanguardia, 23/7/2020)
Bad for business	Tactical urbanism harms local businesses by restricting car access	…the municipality makes it impossible for residents from other neighbourhoods to reach the city centre using their preferred means of transport, imposing a tactical urbanism which isolates businesses in the city centre… (El Periódico, 12/10/2020)
Barcelona-centric	Tactical urbanism unfairly prioritises Barcelona residents over the needs of the wider metropolitan area	…imposing so-called tactical urbanism, ignoring the metropolitan dimension of mobility, acting in a local way in an area which requires global solutions… (La Vanguardia, 23/5/2021)
Improve public transport first	Tactical urbanism limits car accessibility without providing public transport alternatives	…any measure which entails a reduction of private transport, in the Eixample or elsewhere, needs to be preceded by an improvement in the public transport which will substitute it. (La Vanguardia, 12/11/2020)
Unwarranted	Tactical urbanism measures are simply unwarranted or nonsensical	Let us assess the convenience of these inventions of more than doubtful usefulness which are bundled under the umbrella of so-called tactical urbanism. (La Vanguardia, 14/9/2020).
Reduction of loading spaces	Tactical urbanism entails the loss of loading spaces, thereby hindering urban freight distribution	Deliverers of goods (especially groceries) have complained that the traffic lane restrictions have been applied… without taking their needs into account. (La Vanguardia, 16/6/2020).

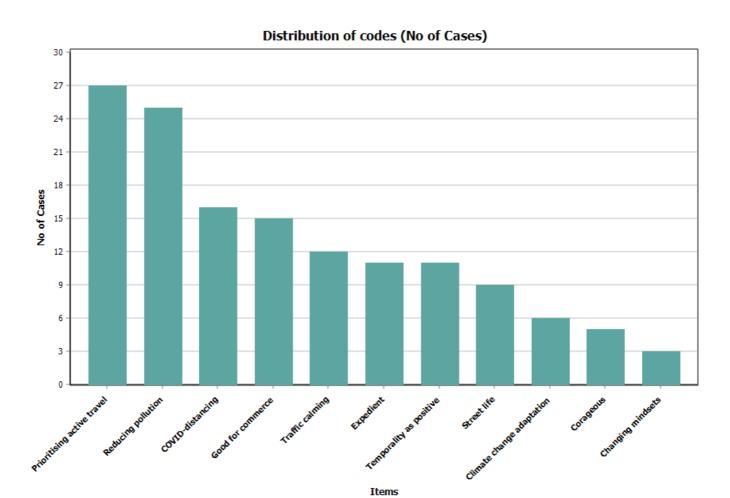| Code	Explanation	Example
Street obstacles	Tactical urbanism introduces street obstacles for pedestrians	New and enormous planter boxes… encourage pedestrians to participate in an unexpected obstacle race. (La Vanguardia, 11/3/2021)
No bike lane	Tactical urbanism ignores the needs of cyclists	More pedestrians, fewer vehicles, and the bicycle once again in limbo. There will be no segregated bike lane… (El Periódico, 23/3/2021)
Unambitious	Tactical urbanism measures lack long-term ambition or permanence	-How do you assess tactical urbanism interventions? -Positively because they are brave. And negatively because they only go halfway. (El Periódico, 13/3/2021)
Too much street life	Tactical urbanism encourages too much street life, leading to problems like street litter, noise, and antisocial behaviour	Residents and local businesses create a platform against the municipal tactical urbanism intervention, scheduled for the beginning of 2022, because they consider that it will encourage dirtiness and excesses. (El Periódico, 26/10/2021)

Figure 6: Positive codes on tactical urbanism (n=106)

Table 4: Positive codes on tactical urbanism

Code	Explanation	Example
Prioritising active travel	Tactical urbanism gives street space back to pedestrians and cyclists	At the end what we want is to separate cars, give space to bikes and provide more sidewalk space for people to use. (El Periódico, 27/2/2021)
Reducing pollution	Tactical urbanism contributes to reduce air and noise pollution	Pollution related to car traffic causes 1,000 deaths a year in Barcelona. Why should we allow people to continue dying when we can avoid it? (El Periódico, 13/3/2021)
COVID-distancing	Tactical urbanism makes it easier to practice social distancing and follow COVID-19 guidelines	… once the first lockdown was over, it was appropriate to reclaim space so that pedestrians could go out on the street while maintaining to social distancing guidelines. (La Vanguardia, 20/6/2021)
Good for commerce	Tactical urbanism contributes to increased local commerce	[Temporary cafe terraces] are appreciated because they have allowed many of Barcelona's cafes with almost no indoor capacity to survive, which would have otherwise disappeared because of pandemic restrictions. (El Periódico, 4/6/2021)
Traffic calming	Tactical urbanism calms motorised traffic and reduces its speed, thereby improving traffic safety	The mayor also highlighted that "where these elements have been installed… traffic speeds have diminished, and this reduces the probability of an accident". (La Vanguardia, 9/9/2020)
Expedient	Tactical urbanism is fast and cheap to implement	This type of intervention makes it possible act quickly and at a low cost… (El Periódico, 4/10/2020)
Temporality as positive	The temporary nature of tactical urbanism allows for revision through trial and error	"It is also positive that that these measures are temporary. The best way to act is to try them out, see how they work and what effects they have before implementing definitive measures". (El Periódico, 16/6/2020)
Street life	Tactical urbanism increases street life and promotes lively public spaces	[The temporary street closure] … was an unexpected success. The deckchairs were full, people played tennis table and piano, and above all, emptied the sidewalks and enjoyed the pavement with great pleasure. El Periódico (4/10/2020)
Climate change adaptation	Tactical urbanism contributes to climate change adaptation and mitigation	"The implemented tactical interventions draw upon and are justified by a city model… which responds to an existing objective, which is related to public health and the climate emergency" (El Periódico, 4/10/2020)
Courageous	Tactical urbanism is politically brave, since it challenges the status quo	"It is very difficult to run the risk and have the courage of rehumanizing a space which is usually given to the car" … (El Periódico, 9/9/2020)
Changing mindsets	Tactical urbanism may contribute to change entrenched mindsets and habits	The experience of having experienced traffic-calmed streets might make it easier for initiatives like this one to be accepted by the public. (El Periódico, 3/7/2020)

3.3   *Frames*

In the present section, I explore how the individual codes presented above coalesce into overarching media narratives or frames. Based on the grouping of related codes, I present five main frames on tactical urbanism, three of them negative and two positive. While alternative groupings or categorisations may be possible, I argue that these frames effectively capture the most prominent media narratives in favour and against tactical urban measures, with each frame acting as a convenient shorthand for a different discourse on tactical urbanism. Given the general imbalance towards negative coverage of tactical urbanism in the analysed news items, negative frames came across more strongly in the analysis, and I accordingly describe them in more detail. I have given each frame a title which seeks to memorably capture its essence. I begin by presenting the three negative frames from most to least prominent, followed by the two positive frames in the same order. Table 5 presents the individual codes which are most closely associated with each frame.

Table 5: Main individual codes associated with each media frame

Frame	Main codes
Disorder and decadence	Ugly, dangerous, improvised, betrayal of design excellence, confusing
The war on cars	Unilateral, ideological, unwarranted, improve public transport first
Strangling the city	Congestion, bad for business, Barcelona-centric, reduction of loading spaces
The new hygienism	Reducing pollution, COVID-distancing, traffic calming, climate change adaptation
Reclaiming the street	Prioritising active travel, good for commerce, street life

1) Disorder and decadence

The most prominent negative frame on tactical urbanism can be effectively captured under the heading of "disorder and decadence". This frame criticises tactical urbanism measures on aesthetic and affective grounds, rather than because of their impacts on urban mobility. Tactical urbanism measures are seen a blemish on the city, and accused of introducing disorder and confusion into the public realm. Tactical interventions are referred to in disparaging and ironic terms, and frequently considered excessively colourful, frivolous, and childish: as expressed by the Royal Automobile Club of Catalonia (quoted in *La Vanguardia*, 4/1/2021), tactical urbanism entails the "infantilisation of public space". Likewise, tactical urbanism is seen as causing a loss of rationality in public space, creating "an excess of confusion where clarity ought to prevail" (*El Periódico*, 4/10/2020). In many cases, these critiques are not confined to tactical urbanism, but consider tactical urbanism as the epitome of broader dissatisfaction with current municipal policies, mentioning it in conjunction with issues which go beyond tactical urbanism itself (e.g. litter, public safety, vandalism). The following quotes illustrate this rhetoric:

> The opposition also complained that many of these elements add to the image of Barcelona as a shabby city and foster a "third world" aesthetic. (*La Vanguardia*, 15/9/2020)
>
> The misnamed tactical urbanism which has recently appeared in Barcelona is not urbanism because instead of ordering, it disorders, and in any case, implements urban interventions which rather appear to belong to a banana republic. (*La Vanguardia*, 18/4/2021)
>
> The left transforms cities into an idealist pandemonium: cyclists and traffic, business and naturalism, e-scooters and tourism, tactical urbanism. (*La Vanguardia*, 26/4/2021)

In various accounts, tactical urbanism is presented as contributing to the perceived decadence of the city, and counterpoised with Barcelona's alleged tradition of excellence in public design. In some cases, tactical urbanism is portrayed as betraying the vision of Ildefons Cerdà's *Eixample* plan, while in others it is seen as a decline from the legacy of the 1992 Olympics and the internationally renowned "Barcelona model" of urban planning and design (Marshall 2000; Monclús 2003):

> Tactical urbanism represents besmearing the city to the utmost in the fastest way. I don't question the goal, but the lack of respect towards a city which previously stood out for its design and care for public space. A city which every time seems closer to the third world and further away from the quality standards which brought it closer to the European mirror. Barcelona has stopped being the city of design, innovative urbanism and order in order to become a city of ugliness, tactical urbanism and chaos. Nevertheless, this is not the image of Barcelona, it is the image of its government. (*La Vanguardia*, 27/3/2021)

Although the "disorder and decadence" frame is the most distinctive and conspicuous of the five identified frames – particularly in *La Vanguardia* – it is also the most specific to the political and historical context of Barcelona. Indeed, the narrative that tactical urbanism is "destroying Barcelona" in many cases appears to reflect not so much a considered opposition to tactical urbanism, but a strong will to criticise mayor Ada Colau, who has become a personal target of opposition both from pro-business lobbies and supporters of Catalan independence, who have criticised her ambivalence on this issue.

2) The war on cars

To borrow the name from a well-known podcast[2], the second most prominent negative

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[2] See https://thewaroncars.org.

frame on tactical urbanism can be summarised as "the war on cars". In this frame, tactical urbanism is presented as unreasonably limiting the individual right to travel by car, and pursuing an ideological warfare which demonises private vehicle use. Tactical urbanism is accused of being dogmatic and presenting a simplistic "anti-car" narrative which ignores the realities of urban life, which require a high degree of car accessibility:

> The local government insists in its sickly obsession of choking our mobility, and has made use of the state of emergency to further their phobia towards cars and their sectarian vision by promoting tactical urbanism, instead of championing a true commitment to public transport. (*La Vanguardia*, 26/11/2021)

> "It is not tactical urbanism, but clearly urbanism against private vehicles", pointed out the spokeswoman of Barcelona pel Canvi, Eva Parera, who complained about the lack of dialogue on the part of the municipality, which she accused of taking decisions without carrying out proper studies, and implementing urban changes which assume that everyone can work from home. (*La Vanguardia*, 6/10/2020)

In some cases, tactical urbanism is also portrayed as imposing the agenda of a (left-wing) urban elite on the rest of the metropolitan area, which cannot afford to renounce to car travel when travelling to the city centre, since public transport connections are deemed to be deficient.

3) Strangling the city

The final negative frame sees tactical urbanism as "strangling" the city by reducing traffic capacity in the city centre. Although it is closely related to the previous frame, what is distinctive is its use of a dominant metaphor which views the city as a living organism, and car traffic as its lifeblood. In this frame, motorised traffic is presented as the indispensable fluid (e.g. blood, oxygen or water) which keeps the city alive, which if interrupted or congested risks asphyxiating or crippling urban vitality. This vitality is generally expressed in economic terms, with traffic restrictions seen as detrimental to

businesses and the attractiveness of urban areas. The following quotes exemplify this thinking:

> I am the first person to be convinced of the need to reduce private vehicle use in order to reduce emissions and improve air quality, but making it a nightmare to enter Barcelona by strangling streets does not seem to deliver great results. (La Vanguardia, 15/10/2021)

> … many of these measures have exacerbated the negative economic impact of the corona crisis on the commercial areas of the city centre, which are empty of tourists, and which the locals now also have difficulty accessing because of the measures imposed by the municipality. (La Vanguardia, 5/10/2020)

This is arguably the simplest of the negative frames on tactical urbanism, as well as the least specific to the context of Barcelona. Thinking of car traffic as a fluid and of congestion as a problem which risks "choking" cities has traditionally been the dominant approach in traffic management, particularly within the modernist vision of the city which aspires to the rational and efficient circulation of mobility (Buchanan 1964; Nikolaeva and Nello-Deakin, 2019). More broadly, this frame taps into a longstanding line of urban thought which conceptualises the city through bodily metaphors, comparing streets to human arteries or nerves (Galvis and Singh 2012).

4) The new hygienism

As illustrated in Figure 4, positive appreciations of tactical urbanism are frequently justified through the prism of public health. In this "new hygienism" frame, tactical urbanism is praised as a tool to reduce traffic pollution and accidents, enable social distancing in the context of COVID-19, and encourage physical activity through active travel:

> "What this report tells us is that it is urgent, in the short term, to implement actions to reduce the mortality caused by air pollution. As we see it, we need to intervene in transport and urbanism. Either we occupy the space which is dedicated to private vehicles, or we will not succeed". (*El Periódico*, 20/20/2020)

In some cases, tactical urbanism is presented as recovering the hygienist spirit of the Cerdà plan for the *Eixample* district, thereby embodying a "new hygienism" which reflects the urban challenges of the 21st century. This frame provides a direct counternarrative to the "disorder and decadence" frame: instead of dismantling or defacing Cerdà's urban model, tactical urbanism is portrayed as an effort to update it. The following quotation exemplifies this rhetoric:

> Sanz [deputy mayor] defended herself from the critiques and recalled that the Cerdà plan was created under the principles of salubrity, social justice, and also linked to the working class, and that now, in a moment of climate emergency, is the time to update it. (*La Vanguardia*, 15/9/2020)

5) Reclaiming the street

The second positive frame on tactical urbanism portrays it as a means of "reclaiming the street" for pedestrians, cyclists, and public space at the cost of motorised traffic. What distinguishes this frame is its emphasis on the (in)justice of existing road space distribution (see Creutzig et al. 2020; Nello-Deakin 2019) and the historical processes which led to the privileging of motorised traffic over other modes of transport. This frame presents tactical measures as contributing to restore the more equitable distribution of urban road space which used to be the norm before the advent of mass motorisation (Norton 2011; Oldenziel and de la Bruhèze 2011). From this perspective, tactical urbanism contributes to repair the "mistake" of post-war city planning and its priorisation of car traffic, reverting to a more holistic understanding of city streets (Hebbert 2005; Mehta 2014). The following two quotes exemplify this thinking:

…it is crucial to see these tactical urbanism interventions within the context of the "justice of public distribution: Is it fair that around 70% of the city is allocated to moving and stationing motor vehicles, which only account for 20% of trips"? (*El Periódico*, 4/10/2021)

Assumpció Puig, dean of the College of Architects of Catalonia (COAC), also applauds the way in which "the lockdown has been used to start and reclaim the space occupied by the car as a privilege". (*El Periódico*, 9/9/2020)

4   Discussion

As shown by the results of the coding process, media portrayals of tactical urbanism in Catalonia's two main newspapers reflect a clear ideological divide. Coverage of tactical urbanism in *la Vanguardia* is overwhelmingly negative, while *el Periódico* adopts a more neutral or moderately positive tone. Judgements of tactical urbanism mostly reflect the opinions of politicians, newspaper editorials, or the individual opinion of the author, but few news items give voice to the opinions of residents (Table 2). This suggests that media portrayals of tactical urbanism amplify competing political discourses, rather than represent the viewpoints of the general population. Positive and negative frames present tactical urbanism in diametrically opposite terms, leading to the existence of mutually exclusive narratives which may enhance the polarisation of public opinion. Where positive frames present tactical urbanism as a gain of space (for pedestrians), for example, negative frames present it as a loss of space (for cars); where positive accounts see tactical urbanism as expedient and economical, negative ones accuse it of being hasty and shoddy.

A second key point which emerges from my findings is the prominence of *aesthetic* and *procedural* negative critiques, which in many cases overshadow discussion of tactical urbanism's impacts on mobility and public space. This confirms Sargisson et al.'s (2022) finding that aesthetics can be very important in shaping the public acceptance of

tactical interventions. In some cases, however, I suspect that these critiques may also provide a more socially acceptable way of justifying substantial opposition to the goals of tactical urbanism: when reading between the lines, various stories which superficially focus their critique on aesthetic elements hint at a deeper dissatisfaction with the restrictions imposed on car drivers. Likewise, various aesthetic critiques by commentators from architectural and planning circles may plausibly interpreted as a reaction to their own loss of power in decision-making in Barcelona, where public space design has traditionally been strongly controlled by a narrow set of "starchitects" from specific institutions (Monclús 2003). As various news items suggest, certain positive justifications of tactical urbanism based on public health arguments related to COVID-19 can also be interpreted as a somewhat duplicitous excuse to restrict car usage, without explicitly framing it in this way. Both in the case of negative and positive frames on tactical urbanism, therefore, there appears a tendency to cloak normative positions for or against car restrictions by appealing to other justifications such as aesthetics or public health.

A third point worth highlighting is that some negative criticisms of tactical urbanism appear to contradict each other: various stories, for instance, judge tactical urbanism as *simultaneously* insufficient and excessive. On the one hand, they condemn tactical urbanism as little more than a series of haphazard isolated interventions with no long-term vision, while simultaneously accusing it of forming part of a grand ideological conspiracy to eliminate cars from cities. Similarly, various stories criticise the objectives of tactical urbanism, and then proceed to denounce its own failure in meeting these same objectives (for instance, by decrying the loss of loading spaces, and then proceeding to complain that tactical sidewalks are invaded by delivery lorries). This suggests that certain negative media portrayals may be driven more by a political

will to criticise the current municipal administration, rather than a principled objection to tactical urbanism itself.

The media frames identified present relevant implications for urban planners seeking to implement tactical urbanism interventions. As argued by Vigar et al. (2011), "schemes which might be technically desirable should be considered with one eye on how they are likely to be received in the public domain and by media professionals particularly". With this consideration in mind, how might planners try to minimise potential media backlash associated with tactical urbanism?

Since interventions which reduce space for cars inevitably provoke negative reactions from the status quo, some criticism is unavoidable (Sadik-Khan and Solomonow, 2016), but at least planners should try to anticipate and pre-empt some of these critiques. The inventory of identified media arguments against tactical urbanism identified (Table 3), I suggest, offers a useful checklist against which to check tactical urbanism schemes. For each item, planners might consider whether proposed interventions sufficiently consider potential negative criticisms. Given the prominence of aesthetic critiques (Figure 5), attending to this aspect seems essential. As suggested by Sargisson et al. (2022), including residents and local stakeholders in the design process might help to minimise potential backlash on this front, by making sure local aesthetic sensibilities are taken into account when designing the visual aspects of tactical interventions (e.g. paint, colours, planters). Beyond aesthetics, greater involvement of the local community in the design process might also reduce procedural critiques accusing tactical urbanism measures of being imposed unilaterally.

Finally, and in order to avoid the polarisation of media narratives, I suggest that municipal planners strive to promote alternative frames which move away from seeing the street as a zero-sum battlefield between different transport modes (see Nikolaeva et

al. 2019). On this point, emphasising the experimental nature of tactical urbanism could help build a wider coalition which transcends political boundaries (Marshall, Duval and Main 2015). From this "experimental" perspective, tactical urbanism is understood as neither inherently good nor bad, but simply as a tool which allows to arrive at solutions for the design of public space through iterative trial and error, thereby constituting a type of "street experiment" (Bertolini 2020). Critically, this narrative might appeal to a wide range of stakeholders, from grassroots collectives to business-oriented actors who view tactical urbanism as part of wider "living lab" strategies related to urban innovation and creativity. Admittedly, such an accommodating frame presents dangers such as depoliticisation and co-optation (Mould 2014), but it might provide a way to broaden political and social consensus on the implementation of tactical urbanism.

In future research, it would be interesting to explore the extent to which the prominence of arguments for and against tactical urbanism (as well as the five overarching frames identified) are replicated in other cities which have implemented similar measures (e.g. Paris, London). Although some of the identified frames are more specific to the local context of Barcelona than others, it is likely that these frames are equally present in other contexts, even if the relative prominence of each frame might be different. More broadly, future research could examine the extent to whether the identified frames apply not only to tactical urbanism, but are also to other types of urban interventions aiming to reduce car usage. Finally, it would be valuable to investigate the degree to which the prominence of media arguments for and against tactical urbanism reflect the views of the wider urban population.

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