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# ‘Fowl’ play: reverse place-branding of Toxteth, liverpool through the celebrity discourse of Robbie Fowler

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## ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates the concept of place-branding and celebrity. It uses Liverpool Football Club striker Robbie Fowler and his roots in Toxteth as a way to contest the unidirectional relationship between celebrity and place. Where ‘traditional’ place-branding sees a celebrity’s positive symbolic capital transferred to place, this paper shows how the direction of transfer may be reversed with the symbolic capital of a place flowing towards the celebrity. It takes the stigmatized area of Toxteth and shows what happens when the negative symbolic capital of place is entered into the discourse of celebrity. In the case of Fowler, this paper highlights how a territorially stigmatised Toxteth is used as both a symbolic millstone that drags him down and an illustration of his achievements ‘against the odds’. Using a Critical Discourse Analysis and drawing on a Chomskyan framing of the political economy of the media, this paper suggests that the linking of Fowler and Toxteth is illustrative of a broader neoliberal ideology that sees symbolic violence as the means of ensuring a distinct social stratification.

## Juego ‘Sucio’: el inverso de la marca de lugar de Toxteth, Liverpool a través del discurso de la celebridad de Robbie Fowler

Este artículo cuestiona el concepto de marca de lugar y celebridad. Utiliza al delantero del Club de fútbol Liverpool, Robbie Fowler, y sus raíces en Toxteth como una forma de disputar la relación unidireccional entre celebridad y lugar. Donde la marca de lugar ‘tradicional’ ve el capital simbólico positivo de una celebridad transferido a un lugar, este documento muestra cómo la dirección de la transferencia puede invertirse con el capital simbólico de un lugar fluyendo hacia la celebridad. El artículo toma el área estigmatizada de Toxteth y muestra lo que sucede cuando el capital simbólico negativo del lugar se introduce en el discurso de la celebridad. En el caso de Fowler, este artículo destaca cómo un Toxteth territorialmente estigmatizado se utiliza tanto como un hito simbólico que lo arrastra hacia abajo como una ilustración de

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## MOTS CLEFS

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sus logros 'contra todo pronóstico'. Usando un Análisis Crítico del Discurso y con base en un marco chomskiano de la economía política de los medios, este artículo sugiere que la vinculación de Fowler y Toxteth es ilustrativa de una ideología neoliberal más amplia que ve la violencia simbólica como el medio para asegurar una distintiva estratificación social.

### « Fowl play »: le marketing territorial inversé de Toxteth à travers les discours sur la célébrité autour de Robbie Fowler, joueur de Liverpool

Cet article examine le concept de marketing territorial et de célébrité. Il se sert de l'attaquant vedette de Liverpool, Robbie Fowler, et de son quartier natal de Toxteth pour argumenter le rapport unidirectionnel entre la célébrité et le lieu. Tandis que le marketing urbain « traditionnel » repose sur le capital symbolique d'une star qui se transfère au lieu, cet article démontre comment cette translation peut être inversée, avec le capital symbolique d'un lieu qui se dirige vers la star. Il choisit le quartier stigmatisé de Toxteth et montre ce qui se produit quand le capital symbolique négatif d'un lieu s'est inséré dans le discours sur la célébrité. Dans le cas de Fowler, il souligne la manière dont le stigmate territorial de Toxteth sert à la fois comme un symbole de boulet qui l'entraîne vers le fond, mais aussi comme illustration de sa réussite « en dépit de l'adversité ». En se servant d'une analyse critique du discours et s'appuyant sur une définition de l'économie politique des médias empruntée à Chomsky, cet article suggère que le lien entre Fowler et Toxteth est indicateur d'une idéologie néolibérale plus large, qui perçoit le symbole de la violence comme le moyen de garantir une stratification sociale distincte.

## 1. Introduction

Before I became 'God', the media tried out the nickname of the 'Toxteth terror' for me ... I always think deep down it was a little dig in some way, suggesting that I was this scally who had crawled out of the gutter. When you think about it, it kind of puts Toxteth down, because I'm sure it's meant to imply something negative about it being a terrible place, and about me being a bit thick (Fowler, 2005, 9).

In the past two decades, there has been a rise in literature within the disciplines of human geography, urban studies, and sociology that focuses on place-branding or the highlighting of a place's unique attribute for commercial, competitive, or reputational gain (Andrews and Jackson, 2001; Crawford, 2004; Wise & Harris, 2010). Place-branding can focus on the national scale where postmodern forms of 'soft power' are exercised in order to promote state foreign policy (Van Ham, 2008) or it can scale down to the individual town or city (Ashworth, 2009); regardless of scale, through place branding, places are marketized and 'branded' to improve image, tourism, investment, and other forms of profit-making.

Often, the notion of celebrity is connected to place in the process of place-branding in the hope that the symbolic and cultural capital of the celebrity will transfer to place and improve the area's reputation. Gregory Ashworth terms this 'the Gaudi gambit', in reference to the initiative that saw the 'successful personality branding of Barcelona in

the 1980s with an extremely distinctive and recognisable architect and designer of some 60 years earlier, such that the image of the city is now inseparable from the creative work of the artist' (2009, 11).

But, what happens when the process is reversed? Celebrity place-branding is usually seen to be unidirectional with the positive social, cultural, and economic capital of the celebrity transferring to place. What happens when, rather than the discourse of celebrity being fed into the discourse of place, the discourse of place is fed into the discourse of celebrity? What happens when the symbolic value being transferred is not positive? Ultimately, I ask what happens when a symbolically stigmatized place is entered into the discourse of the celebrity? What happens to both place and celebrity in this role reversal?

This paper examines these questions by using the case study of Liverpool Football Club (LFC) striker Robbie Fowler<sup>1</sup> and his hometown of Toxteth in Liverpool. As discussed below, Fowler experienced a chequered career in British football, marred by several high-profile political and cultural faux pas (Burton, 1999; Tanner, 1997) while remaining an icon for LFC supporters. Fowler's Toxteth roots bear particular relevance; Toxteth, a district in the south-end of Liverpool, endured intense press stigmatization during the entirety of the 20<sup>th</sup> century due, in part, to associations with poverty and presence of minority groups, structural barriers to employment, and uprisings (Butler, 2019; Butler-Warke, 2020a).

Unlike the more conventional 'Gaudi gambit' approach, the 'Toxteth Terror' approach sees the negative symbolism and stigmatization of Toxteth applied to a celebrity discourse about Fowler, in order to serve two ends: first, to highlight the level of Fowler's achievement 'against the odds' and, second, to justify his behaviour, suggesting that Toxteth served as a symbolic millstone, dragging him down. These discursive constructions stigmatize both Fowler and Toxteth highlighting the ways in which place and individual experience and emotion are tightly bound (Giuliani, 2003). This example will prove instructive for a broader understanding of reverse place-branding, which sees place serving as a symbolic millstone that mars the reputation of a celebrity. I show that journalists and editors are deliberately reproducing the existing stigma attached to Toxteth (Butler, 2019) in order to imply, as Fowler explains, 'something negative about [Toxteth] being a terrible place, and about me being a bit thick' (Fowler, 2005, 9). The negative reputation of Toxteth fits within a larger debate about the stereotyped media representation of the wider city of Liverpool as being both aggrieved and aggravating (Boland, 2008). The deliberate insertion of the discourse of stigmatized Toxteth – nested within stigmatized Liverpool – into the discourse of celebrity shows what happens when place-branding is reversed.

I begin the paper with a short contextual discussion of place branding before turning to a justification of the use of Toxteth and Robbie Fowler as a case study. I then offer a description of the methods used in the study before presenting an analysis of how the stigmatization of Toxteth is produced and reproduced in British newspapers between 1982 and 1999 by inserting reference to Toxteth into stories about Robbie Fowler.

## 2. Place branding and stigma

Place branding is a feature of the neoliberal economy (Eisenschitz, 2010, 21) where the identity of a place is marketized, 'attracting everything from investment and tourism to foreign students and skilled labour' (Papadopoulos, 2004, 36). It is invoked as part of

neoliberal place competition that creates competition between cities for accolades, impacts, host city status and designations in the context of a neoliberal 'audit society' intent on ranking and stratification (Boland et al., 2020, 791). 'Personality association' place branding (Ashworth 2009) sees cities rely on 'local celebrities usually from sport or entertainment to endorse them in the hope that the fame of the celebrity will transfer to the place' such that the celebrity becomes a sort of 'patron saint or place mascot' (2009, 13). The 'brand' of the celebrity is marketized with the hope that 'celebrity earned in one segment of the cultural economy can be transferred via product endorsements to other segments of the economy at large' (Currid-Halkett & Scott, 2013, 3).

Place branding literature generally considers scenarios in which positive celebrity attributes are foregrounded and their cultural capital transferred to place, though acknowledgement is made that externally imposed negative place branding can damage a country, city or entity's reputation (Van Ham, 2008). This process is not uncontroversial, however. The naming of airports in Belfast and Liverpool after George Best and John Lennon, respectively, highlight some of the 'sanitisation' of narratives and the 'distory' of the two figures in order to produce a 'cleansed' image (Boland & McKay, 2020, 4). Ashworth considers the problems that arise from negative personality associations between place and (in)famous individuals, discussing the difficulties in 'disassociating' person from place (2010, 228). Where many towns and cities are known for links to an artist or author, Ashworth notes that a place's depiction in art or literature can present problems for place management strategies. The area of Salford, he argues, is permanently cemented into the public imagination through Lowry's industrial scenes; rebranding is, Ashworth argues, far more difficult than branding (2010, 229). This negative intertwining bears similarity to the difficulty in shedding negative event stigma from place (Butler-Warke, 2020a; Holt & Wilkins, 2015) and, more broadly, to the process of place-based (or territorial) stigmatization where the image perpetuated is not 'in favour of the desirous city, but against it' (Pohl, 2017, 32).

Where the purpose of place branding is to enhance investment in the area, negative place branding or territorial stigma can be enacted for political or economic ends (Slater, 2017). Politically, territorial stigma serves as a justification to engage in a discourse that demonizes those living in particular – often working class – areas (Gray & Mooney, 2011; Hancock & Mooney, 2011; Jones, 2012; Kornberg, 2016). Acknowledging that *territorial* stigma is often a byword for stigma directed towards class or 'problem people', Imogen Tyler (2013) argues that territorial stigma has 'become a device to *procure consent for punitive policies* directed at those living at the bottom of the class structure' (Slater 2017, 117, emphasis in original). This means that territorial stigma, a distinctly place-based phenomenon, can take on a class aspect that seeks to divide space by the 'type' of people living there.

The perpetuation of a negative reputation of a place and its population is, ultimately, an act of violence and a manifestation of power. It represents a 'symbolic, diffuse, slow and indirect' form of violence (Tyler, 2020) that gradually degrades and defames the place and its population. Such indirect and symbolic violence forms part of a system of 'stigma power' in which individuals in positions of hegemonic power activate stigma or negative reputation with the aim of 'keeping other people down, in or away' (Link & Phelan,

2014, 2). In the context of place-branding, the power to name (Melucci, 1996) – to brand – an area with a particular reputation is central to neoliberal governance (Rose-Redwood et al., 2019) and the hegemonic dominance of certain groups over others.

Past literature shows some limited exploration of the relationship between sports celebrity and place and, more generally, the political economy of the sports celebrity. Sports figures and place are inextricably linked as athletes ‘create imaginative geographies of places on several scales’ ranging from intra-city to international (Wise & Harris, 2010, 323). Wise and Harris (2010) consider the contested narratives around Carols Tevez and his move from Manchester United to Manchester City and the footballer’s status as ‘poster boy’ of the city whilst simultaneously serving as a ‘representative of Argentina’ (2010, 322). In their edited collection, Andrews and Jackson (2001) suggest that the distilling of a celebrity into a generalised representative that embodies a certain geography is not uncommon and is part of a broader cultural politics of celebrity. Michael Jordan, for example, becomes ‘a brand’ and a cultural signifier – his blackness invoked as a signifier of ‘extraordinary athleticism’ and ‘Black physicality’ that fit with a broader ideological narrative underpinned by colonial framings of race (McDonald and Andrews, 2001, 20–5).

In territorial stigma literature, there is but one mention of ‘superstardom’ in a piece by Wacquant et al. as the authors discuss the spread of ‘toponyms emblematic of urban perdition’ (2014, 1274). Using the example of Rosengård, Sweden, the authors explain, in a footnote, that footballer Zlatan Ibrahimović has been implicit in the condemnation of the district, using a ‘widespread toxic vision to dramatize his ascent, enshroud his skills in mystery, excuse his unconventional behavior, and assert his inbred loyalty’ (2014, 1274). In this example, Ibrahimović is the party responsible for the stigmatization of place. While the result – a deeply stigmatized location – is the same as in the case of Toxteth, the stigmatization of Rosengård is not externally applied, nor is it inserted into unrelated discourses for the purpose of producing stigma. Instead, Ibrahimović relies on his personal narrative of ‘the climb’ to emphasize his success. In the Toxteth case study, I show that the reasons for, and mechanisms by, which Toxteth was stigmatized are quite different.

The concept I discuss is based on the idea of journalistic transfer of low or negative symbolic capital from place (Toxteth) to celebrity (Fowler) for financial ends (to sell copy). Symbolic capital is a term coined by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to refer to a non-financial, but valuable, form of capital that can alter the social position of an individual (or place or object). Symbolic capital can best be thought of as ‘a form of cultural capital that refers to the resources available to people based on honour or prestige, that elevates their status and provides them with a privileged position’ (Castree, 2013).

Farrugia (2011), in his study on the Bourdieusian notion of symbolic capital and homelessness, refers to the negative accumulation of symbolic capital in relation to homelessness as being a ‘symbolic burden’. This idea of a symbolic burden closely matches the idea of place as a ‘symbolic millstone’, which I develop to encapsulate the ‘dragging down’ of individuals by the symbolic weight of place.

The notion of symbolic capital is central to both place branding literature and territorial stigma literatures and yet the two bodies of literature are rarely combined (see, Pohl, 2017 for a notable exception). This paper considers, as previously stated, what happens when, rather than the discourse of celebrity being fed into the discourse of place, the discourse of place is fed into the discourse of celebrity? It considers that negative symbolic capital is

produced and reproduced through the stigmatization of place in relation to celebrity discourse, and suggests, through a Chomskyan analysis (1991), why this symbolic capital may be enacted for financial ends and power acquisition.

### 3. Toxteth and Robbie Fowler: case selection

#### *Toxteth*

Toxteth is an area of south Liverpool located in the L8 postcode. In his autobiography, Fowler describes it as:

Growing up, Toxteth was one of the few properly multiracial areas in Liverpool . . . There was a large black population, mostly families who had lived there for generations, and I don't remember any real trouble between any of the ethnic groups. What did happen, though, according to me [*sic*] dad, was that the police used to stop the black lads all the time, and harass them . . . It wasn't a no-go area by any means, not *Mad Max* or *Precinct 13* or anything like that, but there was serious unemployment, not much money around, and obviously plenty of the roads were run down (2005, 10-11).

Fowler's autobiography here points to the very real structural problems that were occurring in the area. Toxteth is a mixed area with Irish and black communities (Butler-Warke, 2020a). Fowler refers to the poverty, racial discrimination, and police brutality that were rife. Despite a long history of black settlement in Toxteth (Fryer, 1992; Nassy Brown, 2005), Liverpool's black population has largely been outcast from notions of Scouse identity (Boland, 2010a; Christian, 2008). Prior to the outbreak of the 1981 uprising, unemployment for the black population of Liverpool 8, including Toxteth, was 32.5% (Nassy Brown, 2005, 104). The uprising of summer 1981 captured the rising tensions in Toxteth and Fowler postulates that 'whatever the reasons . . . I think people now accept that it [the uprising] was a reaction against the conditions and the oppression' (Fowler, 2005, 11). The main disturbances lasted for only four nights though subsequent violence endured for six weeks and continued to flare for several summers during the 1980s (Frost & Phillips, 2011, 1-2).

Press coverage of the uprising was intense and extensive (Butler, 2019), and the events of 1981 had an impact on the coverage in the years following. When the flames had died down, the police withdrawn, and the streets were quiet again, the press interest in the uprising and, indeed, in Toxteth, did not cease. Instead of retreating, press coverage focused on the legacy of the disturbances, transmuted the stigma based on the event of the uprisings into a background, enduring core stigma (Butler-Warke, 2020b). Journalistic use of the area as a reference point and as emblematic and symbolic of the ills of society, morphed Toxteth from a spatial to a social entity. Coverage of Toxteth between 1982 and 1999 focuses on the general after-effects of the uprisings. It continues to concentrate on the enduring nature of the uprising, and features particular reference to Secretary of State for the Environment Michael Heseltine's involvement in the city of Liverpool, and through the construction of a debate about the role of police (Butler-Warke, 2020a). Other coverage during this time focuses on crime in Toxteth, particularly killings, drug and gang-related crime, and joyriding. More broadly, an enduring fascination with the Liverpool gangsters and drug dealers, such as Curtis 'Cocky' Warren and Stephen 'The Devil' French, and as shown in the recent Sky Documentary series *Liverpool Narcos* (Philipson, 2021) perpetuate a continued focus on Toxteth as a deviant geography.



Combined, a background picture of Toxteth was being generated by the press that showed the area as deviant, dangerous, and a threat to social norms (Butler-Warke, 2020a). This image would be further operationalized by the press as it reproduces further stigma through insertion of Toxteth in the discourse of the celebrity.

### **Robbie Fowler**

Robbie Fowler's rise to fame as a striker for LFC occurred in parallel to the persistently negative coverage of Toxteth, so it is perhaps unsurprising that their discourses and identities became intertwined. His rise to footballing fame, punctuated by occasional scandals, was a media dream. Fowler reflects on the role of the media in his autobiography, pointing out that the media 'wanted to make big, big stars out of players ... Attractive, controversial figures that would sell' (2005,105), thus alluding to the media's financial motives. It is often largely forgotten that the media is an industry whose first aim is to stay in business through the selling of copy and through echoing other elite voices to maintain their dominant position in society (Herman & Chomsky, 1988), but Fowler aptly notes this tendency. He further elaborates:

The media, especially the tabloids, don't deal in shades of grey. It's black or white, good or bad, and nothing in between ... A couple of things happened and it was easy to portray me as the kid from the wrong side of the tracks ... What's funny is that most people these days realize that the papers can distort things, and don't always give an accurate picture because it's their business to make everything sound as sensational as possible (2005, 107).

Fowler's personal life became intimately known to the media: 'they wanted to know about your private life, where even an eighteen-year-old kid's first girlfriend or night out with an MP's daughter made the newspapers' (Fowler, 2005, 105–6). Notable, however, was the media's linking between Fowler's Toxteth roots, his personal life, and his professional success. As this paper will show, sometimes the Toxteth connections were used to highlight how far Fowler had come despite the symbolic millstone of his locational original dragging him down. Sometimes, his roots in Toxteth served as a justification for deviant behavior, but in both cases, the insertion of Toxteth into the discourse of Robbie Fowler's celebrity, resulted in the production and reproduction of a stigmatized vision of Toxteth.

There are other celebrities that have hailed from Toxteth – Ringo Starr, Gerry Marsden of Gerry and the Pacemakers, Pete Wylie of Wah!, and the *Coronation Street* actress Jean Alexander to name a few – however, it is Fowler's life that so notably became enmeshed in the production of the territorial stigmatization of Toxteth. Further, unlike other LFC footballers of the same era, Fowler's Toxteth roots were consistently referenced in the press, suggesting that Fowler was used as a pawn in the larger media attempt to stigmatize Toxteth (Butler, 2019).

## **4. Methods**

Fowler identified that the media industry was a key player in his public reputation, and this fits with a Chomskyian analysis that sees the media as responsible for shaping public perceptions for specific politico-economic reasons (Chomsky, 1989, 1991; Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Using the negative symbolic capital of Toxteth to make certain

connotations about Robbie Fowler and his life, resulted in the persistent and consistent stigmatization of Toxteth. This stigmatization is, I argue, central to the media industry's mission to sell copy through the promulgation of a fearsome social and spatial 'other' (Butler, 2019). For this study,<sup>2</sup> to analyse the role of the media in the production of stigma and their operationalization of Fowler for this purpose, five British newspapers (The *Guardian*, the *Times*, the *Mirror*, the *Express*, and the *Financial Times*) were selected based on availability and so that together they covered a full spectrum of political leanings and formats (Butler, 2019). In addition to a thorough content analysis of these papers, several other key articles inform the research, including those from the *Independent* and the *Daily Mail*, which were drawn on in the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).<sup>3</sup>

As part of a larger project, 1,186 newspaper articles were analysed using a combined quantitative-qualitative analysis that paid attention to the intratextual elements (such as keywords used to describe Toxteth), the main theme of each article, and other discourses that emerge in the text. A first round of analysis was coding to see the general themes that were emerging across the press political spectrum in coverage of Toxteth in the years after the uprising. At this stage, it became evident that a persistent theme was the stigmatization of Toxteth and the transfer of symbolic capital between Fowler and Toxteth.

In a second round of coding 29 selected articles referring to Fowler and Toxteth were subject to a CDA. This second round of analysis connected the intratextual elements with extratextual elements, such as social, political, and economic discourses following the approach promulgated by Anabela Carvalho (2008, 163). Other relevant articles from national and regional papers about Fowler and Toxteth were brought in to augment the analysis yielding a sample of 34 articles that were subject to a CDA.

## 5. Toxteth: the symbolic millstone

As discussed, celebrity birth-place or residence is often invoked to positively link a place with a popular figure: the symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984) of a celebrity is invoked with the hope that the celebrity brand will transfer to a place. In the case of Toxteth, however, the area is transformed into a symbolic millstone that drags down those trying to succeed.

Unlike the 'personality association' principle of place branding (Ashworth, 2009), Fowler is not used to add symbolic, economic, and cultural capital to Toxteth; rather the negative symbolic value of Toxteth is invoked to help explain Fowler's identity and, simultaneously, to negatively brand Toxteth through the media's power of naming (Melucci, 1996, 182).

### *The singling out of Toxteth*

*The Telegraph* discusses the Graeme Le Saux affair where Fowler is accused of directing homosexual taunts at Le Saux, who then elbowed Fowler, resulting in them both being charged with misconduct. Whereas the article describes Le Saux as 'the thoughtful, antique-collecting, *Guardian*-reading product of a prosperous background in Jersey' (Randall, 1999, March 4, 13), Fowler is described as 'the Jack-the-lad scallywag from a corner of Liverpool associated with the riots' (1999, 13). The article then proceeds

with an anonymous quote that states that ‘Robbie rather lives up to the cliché that you can take the boy out of Toxteth but you can’t take Toxteth out of the boy’ (1999, 13), implying that being from Toxteth explains deviant behaviour and that the legacy of Toxteth lingers inescapably.

In his autobiography, Fowler reflects on this structuring that consistently referenced his ‘climb’ to success. He explains that:

Nobody wanted to see past the cliché, it was always about this kid who had come from Toxteth, the ghetto that was famous because the riots had been on the telly, and it looked like Beirut because all the buildings were burnt out. If there’s one thing that does my head in, it’s all the stuff about Toxteth being this shit-hole, the inference being that it was miraculous I managed to claw my way out of there. Just about every top-flight footballer comes from an inner-city council estate, but Toxteth is somehow portrayed as being much worse than all the rest (Fowler, 2005, 9).

Here, apart from stigmatizing Beirut, Fowler aptly captures the reality of the stigmatization of Toxteth by the media because of the ‘riots’ (Butler, 2019). He also decries the media’s coverage of his relation to Toxteth that sees his success as ‘miraculous’ because of his being from Toxteth. It is interesting that Fowler notes that Toxteth is singled out as being ‘much worse’ (2005, 9) than the other areas from which footballers hail. A brief study on the *Times* archive of footballers who played for LFC during the time period shows that Fowler is the player whose roots in Toxteth are continually mentioned. For example, Neil Ruddock’s Wandsworth roots are not mentioned, and neither are Jamie Redknapp’s links to Barton on Sea – both areas are comparatively more affluent and, in the case of Wandsworth, was, by the 1980s, an area of ‘high growth’ following a period of gentrification (Butler et al., 2008, 78). That these areas of comparative affluence do not feature in news stories about Ruddock and Redknapp suggests that the areas were not being depicted as symbolic millstones in the same way that Fowler’s links to Toxteth were being operationalised.

Most notable is that Steve McManaman’s Bootle origins are not discussed. McManaman and Fowler often appear in the same news articles but only Fowler’s roots are emphasised. Bootle, an area just north of Liverpool, has experienced an economic downturn since the end of the Second World War and has been referred to as part of a geography of ‘exclusion’ in the Liverpool region (Boland, 2010b, 636). Bootle, however, is not inserted into stories about McManaman, a footballer whose career was also plagued with scandal following an interview alongside Fowler for the magazine *Loaded!* that saw the two branded as hedonists (Moore, 1997). Both McManaman and Fowler were both implicated in the *Loaded!* scandal and one would expect the media’s coverage of the two to be similar but the media’s response to Fowler (unlike McManaman) is consistently to involve Toxteth in coverage.

Similarly, in December 1998, a *Daily Mail* article about LFC player Michael Owen threatening to leave the club, references manager Gerard Houllier’s ‘battle to keep Steven McManaman at the club’ (Lipton, 1998, n.p.). It does not state from where McManaman hails but then the sentence shifts to Fowler and, unsurprisingly, there is reference to his roots: ‘Robbie Fowler’s long-term future also seems in doubt, with Arsenal regularly linked to the Toxteth-born striker’ (Lipton, 1998, n.p.). In this instance Toxteth is not being overtly stigmatized but it is being inserted into celebrity discourse where other

locations are implied or ignored. Why is it necessary to include reference to Fowler's roots in Toxteth? For journalists, the inclusion of 'Toxteth' must add something either to their depiction of Fowler's behaviour or success, or serves to keep Toxteth present in the public mind. Often this is to remind readers of the counter-normative behaviours associated with the area. This is highlighted in an article in *The Telegraph* where, again, the only footballer whose roots are mentioned is Fowler. The article reads that '[Roy] Evans [then LFC manager] is happy to see the Toxteth youngster, still only 20, developing nicely' (Malam, 1995, November 5, 4). In the next clause, the article shifts to focus on 'Fowler's behaviour off the field' (Malam, 1995, November 5, 4), immediately linking Toxteth with behavioural concerns.

In the previous example, it could be argued that Fowler is singled out because of his scandalous behaviour. However, even when there is another player mentioned who is involved in a scandal, only Fowler's roots are mentioned. Again, in an *Independent* article about the *Loaded!* scandal the stigmatizing discourse of Toxteth is linked with Fowler but Steve McManaman's Bootle roots go unmentioned. Of McManaman the article states that 'when he first appeared at Anfield as a spindly teenager, he was regarded as a winger' (Moore, 1997). The article proceeds to talk about the generally negative reputation of Liverpool's youth, referring to them as 'scallies'. At this point, the article shifts from a focus on McManaman, to a focus on Fowler:

At first, no one suggested McManaman might be a scally. Then Robbie Fowler arrived carrying the baggage of his birthplace, Toxteth, an area blighted in the minds of middle England. Still no real problem, until the pair were interviewed by *Loaded*, which at that time was a new magazine out to make a name for itself (Moore, 1997).

This extract highlights not only the media bias towards Toxteth, but also suggests that in the way that Toxteth blights Fowler's identity, Fowler – blemished because of his links to Toxteth – blights McManaman's identity. The article is unwaveringly supportive of McManaman, suggesting that he has been 'misrepresented both as a footballer and a person' (Moore, 1997). This contrasts starkly with the depiction of Fowler and Toxteth; the two are entwined and entered into the discourse as the scapegoat upon which McManaman's misrepresentation can be blamed. Fowler is not interviewed, and the implicit suggestion is that McManaman's 'misrepresentation' as a 'scally' only occurred because of his proximity to Fowler who, in turn, was smeared because of his proximity to Toxteth. The existing reputation of stigmatized Toxteth is used and reproduced here, contributing to the further smearing of both Fowler and Toxteth.

### ***The 'Toxteth dream'***

Fowler's origins are recurrently referenced and his 'climb' to success is a frequently used motif. An article about Fowler's then-girlfriend, Lisa Brown, begins:

Robbie Fowler was out on a date with his girlfriend and desperate to find some little token of his love that he could give her. But for the impoverished Toxteth kid, all that came to hand was a bottle top lying on the pavement . . . Five years after his bottle top tactic fell flat, Robbie pulls the same pretty blonde into his arms and gives her a long, lingering kiss. They are at the end of a magical, no-expense-spared evening out—alone on the plush sofa in the bedroom of the £300,000 mansion in Liverpool's Mossley Hill . . . In the old days all Robbie could

manage was a 20p bag of chips—which Lisa had to pay for—followed by a clumsy kiss behind a block of flats. But this time the £6,000-a-week star pulled out all the stops, collecting her in his gleaming burgundy Audi and treating her to all the drinks (Grant & Atkinson, 1996, May 10, 20).

This tabloid piece casts temporal continuity aside and flits between Fowler's humble past and his salubrious present. The reporters obliquely compare a block of flats in Toxteth to a mansion in Mossley Hill, 'a 20p bag of chips' to an Audi and drinks, and a bottle top as a gesture of affection to a 'no-expense-spared evening out'. Fowler's past – and Toxteth more generally – is structured as impoverished and is used to highlight his current levels of financial success and attainment. Activating this image of Toxteth, while adding depth and a sense of triumph to Fowler's identity, further reproduces the stigma and brands an already-smear district. Toxteth is marked as a place only worth escaping and is operationalized as a symbol of struggle, as it is constructed as the obstacle Fowler had to overcome in order to achieve success. Fowler's 'miraculous' journey is depicted again in the *Times*, where the reporter describes Fowler's rise from 'the tough suburb of Toxteth' as 'Merseyside's version of the American dream' (Holt, 1997, 48), implying that playing for LFC and moving out of Toxteth is symbolic of success and achievement. Here, Toxteth is tacitly painted as the antithesis to success, prosperity, and good fortune.

Yet, despite his rise, the millstone of Toxteth still hangs around his neck in press coverage as Fowler's success is defined in relation to his beginnings in Toxteth. Fowler's autobiography opens with the reflection that he was frequently referred to as the 'Toxteth Terror' but other similar monikers were also used. He is referred to as 'the Toxteth Kid' (Tanner, 1993a, 19; Hughes, 1994, 17; Price, 1994, 25), 'the kid from Toxteth' (Tanner, 1993b, 32) or the 'Toxteth teenager' (Tanner, 1993c, 27; James, 1994, 25), and during the Le Saux affair, Fowler's 'tough childhood in Toxteth' is referenced (Lacey, 1999, A3) drawing attention to his roots and implying that his Toxteth origins are explanation for his outbursts. A *Mirror* article called 'Robbie burns for a chance with England', in which tells of Fowler's ambitions to play for the England football team, begins with the statement that 'the rise of Robbie Fowler was virtually pre-ordained from the day he was ferried from training to his Toxteth home in the luxury of Kenny Dalglish's Mercedes' (Keith, 1995, 60). Here, the supposed reality of Toxteth is juxtaposed with the luxury of a Mercedes. Where the Mercedes represents extravagance and superfluity, Toxteth tacitly comes to stand for its antithesis: poverty and lack. This view of Toxteth relies on assumed reader knowledge of the uprising, its aftermath and the reported crime in the area but also further brands the area with core attributes of poverty, suffering, and deprivation. That is, the stigmatization of Toxteth during the uprising (Butler, 2019) was foundational in order for this later post-uprising stigma to adhere.

This message is furthered by the large cartoon that accompanies the article, which shows an enlarged and caricatured Fowler. Fowler is depicted in the 1995/1996 Liverpool kit emblazoned with the Adidas stripes and the Carlsberg sponsorship logo visible on the front of his shirt. He is depicted as larger than everything else in the cartoon, and his head is out of proportion to the rest of his muscular body. His brows are furrowed in concentration and the cartoonist has paid particular attention to Fowler's teeth, drawing his mouth open, revealing prominent buck teeth. The right leg is raised in a kicking motion, surrounded by motion lines, and his left foot and leg are also raised off the ground

representing the rebound effect of his kick. At the bottom left of the image, positioned from left to right are a caricature of Kenny Dalglish, his Mercedes and a goalpost full of footballs. Finally, in the bottom right of the cartoon is a direction post signposting 'Toxteth' to the left and 'England' to the right. That the two places are at opposite sides of the pole suggests first that Fowler must leave behind Toxteth to be a successful England footballer and, second, that Toxteth is distinct and opposite to all that symbolizes England and Englishness. The image serves to cast out Toxteth as a geographical and social other. The two cannot coexist; one cannot be 'of Toxteth' whilst also being 'of England'. In the case of Fowler, remaining in Toxteth results in regression.

In an article entitled 'Fowler ready to break with the past', discussing Fowler's selection in the England squad despite several incidents in which Fowler was fined and disciplined for homophobic taunts and 'pranks', reporter Matt Dickinson writes that 'the journey from the Toxteth estate, where many of his friends remain, into a millionaire idol has occasionally taken him off the straight and narrow' (1999, 43). This implies that Fowler's Toxteth heritage still presents him with barriers that he must overcome, given his change in fortunes. Again, the 1990s 'Toxteth estate' is here contrasted directly with being a millionaire and Toxteth is painted as poverty-stricken and troubled.

Some mentions of Fowler stigmatize Toxteth by showing that football has allowed him an escape from the area. Rob Hughes, football correspondent for the *Times*, explains that football has 'taken him from Toxteth, that troubled area of Liverpool, to the more sedate Mossley Hill, where he has purchased a five-bedroomed house for himself, his mother, two brothers and a sister' (Hughes, 1996, 46). By referring to Toxteth as 'that troubled area' using a definite article, Hughes creates a sense that readers are part of a shared and existing understanding of what Toxteth stands for. His writing also engages with the symbolic discourse of 'the journey' that sees Fowler leave behind his roots in Toxteth. He implies that this journey has been possible through football, which has been the conduit that has allowed him to escape Toxteth and to leave the stigma of his roots behind.

This is, of course, somewhat ironic given that the press consistently and persistently refers to Fowler's Toxteth origins, thereby refusing to forget the very 'roots' he is supposedly attempting to leave behind. Even when his roots are not directly or overtly criticized, they are superfluously mentioned. In an article about 'a fracas at a hotel' (Thomas & White, 1999, April 19, A1), the reporters mention that 'Fowler, born in the Toxteth district of Liverpool, played his last game of the season on Saturday' (Thomas & White, 1999, April 19, A1). There is no reason to mention Toxteth in this article: his origins are not relevant to the story.

## 6. Discussion

As this paper has shown, the insertion of Toxteth into coverage of Robbie Fowler draws on existing stigma and prevailing negative symbolic value sometimes to justify Fowler's behaviour, and sometimes to highlight the enormity of his success, even likening his rise out of Toxteth to the American dream (Holt, 1997, 48). I have shown how the unidirectionality and positive valence of place-branding can be reversed: territorial stigma can be simultaneously drawn on and reproduced when entered into the discourse of

a celebrity. Where traditional place-branding sees celebrities transfer their positive symbolic capital to an area for positive financial capital, the process I have described sees the direction reversed with place transferring negative symbolic capital to a person.

This transfer of negative symbolic capital transfer not only stigmatizes Fowler (as the conduit for this symbolic violence to be enacted) but it also depletes any remnants of Toxteth's symbolic capital and continues to reproduce the identity of the district as a 'stigmatised pariah' (Bourdieu, 2000 in Barker, 2012), an outcast from the rest of normative society. Where the 'traditional' place-branding transaction sees symbolic capital transferred into potential financial capital, in this scenario, symbolic capital is diminished and there are no positive potential financial capital benefits for either place or person. The only financial capital generated in this transaction is for the newspaper seeking to sell copy. All that is amplified by the process is the reinforcement of the classification system that separates elite from non-elite members through veils of 'respectability' and 'honourability' (Bourdieu, 1984: 291) and reinforcement of the contrived abyss between them that permits elite construction of the discourse in society (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

The stigmatization of Toxteth shows how Fowler has endured hardship, having triumphed, and having navigated the symbolic millstone that is their hometown. The highly transmissible nature of this negative symbolic capital cannot be understated; as was apparent in the example comparing McManaman and Fowler, the latter was smeared because of his association with Toxteth and, following on, McManaman was smeared because of his proximity and links to the stigmatized Fowler. Through a Chomskyian lens, we see that this entire reverse place-branding process is another mechanism of neoliberal elites to maintain the dominant ideology perpetuated by continued symbolic violence against those already marginalised.

### ***Changing fortunes***

The stigma attached to the intertwined Fowler and Toxteth pairing did subside. Fowler came to be referred to as 'God' by fans (Fowler, 2005), and frequent reference to his Toxteth roots have vanished from press coverage. Instead, Fowler came to occupy the position of 'patron saint or place mascot' (Ashworth 2009, 13) but not for Toxteth. Rather, he becomes a 'patron saint' for the city of Liverpool more generally; his associations with Toxteth are forgotten and, in later years, Fowler's prowess on the pitch is drawn on (in typical place-branding style) to enhance the reputation of the city of Liverpool and to marketize the city. In stark contrast to the structuring that saw him referred to as the 'Toxteth kid' or the 'Toxteth terror', Fowler is, in later years, referred to as the 'Liverpool legend' (Dutton, 2016; Rodger, 2017, July 23). His Toxteth roots are forgotten. While fined by football officials, Fowler gained popular support for his overt show of support for the Liverpool dockers (Carter et al., 2003).<sup>4</sup> His symbolic capital, established after a successful career, is used in a conventional place branding scenario, to transfer to the city of Liverpool. This rapid transition from 'Toxteth terror' to 'Liverpool legend' highlights the transactional nature of stigma and its potential mutability depending on the context and the epistemic ideology.

However, this is not – and cannot – be the complete story. As Kruse (2005) explains in relation to the Beatles' relationship with Liverpool, there is a 'cleaning up of the past' with key elements of Fowler's story omitted in later years as the negative association is no longer useful.

For the casting aside of Toxteth as the poster child of the inner city to be a convincing understanding, it assumes that the city of Liverpool was responsible for the production of Toxteth as an *enfant terrible*. We know that this came from political and media elites rather than from within the city of the Liverpool. Instead, this shift away from the overt stigmatization of 'inner city' Toxteth reflects a broader ideological shift. As the moral panic surrounding the deviant and racialised 'inner cities' of the 1980s and 1990s (Macek, 2006) subsided, new panics set in that are produced and reproduced through the interplay between politics and media: the fear of the white working-class neighbourhood as a site of social abjection (Tyler, 2013), troubled families (Crossley, 2016), and representative of a type of 'welfare ghetto' (Hancock & Mooney, 2013). Alongside the fear of the abject white poor, arose another poster child of urban panic: the migrant neighbourhood. A narrative of – and fear of – the 'ghettoisation' of various towns, cities and regions of the UK rose to the fore (Mullen, 2018). We have seen 'a re-spatialisation of anxieties away from urban sites associated with dynamic "black cultures" to those associated with "Muslim communities" which also display particularly acute forms of social and economic disadvantage' (Rhodes and Brown, 2019: 3254).

Thus, the 'benefit' of symbolic violence against Toxteth and the inner cities as the moral vice of the 1980s and 1990s subsided. No longer was the construction of distinction between elite and non-elite actors reliant on the symbolic degradation of the inner cities and the denigration of Toxteth and other 'inner cities' lost its symbolic value.

## 7. Conclusion

While the use of the celebrity in place branding is not new, this paper has shown a related but distinct phenomenon whereby the unidirectional relationship between celebrity and place is contested, showing that the British press has enacted a very different framing of place and celebrity in relation to Toxteth. The aim of place branding is that 'the image of the city is now inseparable from the creative work of the artist' (Ashworth 2009, 11). In the case of Toxteth, particularly with regards to Robbie Fowler, the image of Toxteth *is* intertwined with that of the footballer but in a very different way that both operationalizes and results in the stigmatization the district. The already-stigmatized Toxteth is used to emphasize the challenge faced by Fowler on his rise to stardom. Simultaneously, this structuring further smears Toxteth, implying that the area is a hinderance to success.

Where Slater (2017) has shown that the stigmatization of place can be operationalized for economic or political ends, this paper has shown that sometimes the stigma is enacted for symbolic and politico-economic reasons. Toxteth becomes a symbol of struggle and, while its stigmatization results in negative symbolic capital for the district, it enhances the cultural capital of the celebrity. Toxteth represents difficult beginnings that make success even more acute. This enhanced symbolic capital of the celebrities is then used to transfer star status from the celebrity to the city of Liverpool as a whole. This highlights the



complicated and tangled process of stigmatization and branding; while Toxteth's cultural capital was sacrificed to enhance the cultural capital of Robbie Fowler, it was ultimately the city of Liverpool that benefitted from this capital as it engaged in a form of true place branding by personality association. The stigmatization of Toxteth was produced and reproduced at different moments for different ends. The constant, however, is that the ends always serve the elite voices that dominate media and politics, always manipulated to match the unique needs of a neoliberal regime.

This paper has underscored the need identified by Slater (2017) to consider the symbolic elements of urban studies. As the city of Liverpool continues to attempt to rebrand and to use celebrities as a means of enhancing the city's reputation through the transfer of symbolic capital from celebrity to city, we need to understand firstly, the origin of the celebrity's symbolic capital that marketing agencies and councils are banking on and, secondly, that the relationship between celebrity and place is not unidirectional. Rather than celebrity capital always enhancing the capital of a place, this paper has highlighted the ways in which the transfer of symbolic capital may be reversed in order to sometimes bolster the reputation and image of the celebrity, and sometimes to justify and explain the behaviour of a celebrity.

Ultimately, we see the manufactured discourse around Fowler and Toxteth and its sudden decline when that discourse no longer suited the overarching ideological constraints of the era, exemplifies neoliberal stratification (Holmqvist, 2021) that sees status, division based on difference, and the search for legitimacy as hallmarks of a neoliberal society; the enmeshing of Fowler and Toxteth was operationalized – for a time – to further a narrative of difference and deviance. The stigmatization of celebrity through association with a stigmatized place forms part of the broader transactional nature of urban ordering and branding, and of the neoliberal processes of distinction between groups and tastes.

## Notes

1. It is beyond the scope of this paper to ascertain and describe how Fowler himself identifies. Notably, his autobiography begins with a chapter entitled 'Toxteth' but to surmise that this means that Fowler identifies as the 'lad from Toxteth' would be supposition.
2. When considering newspapers in relation to Liverpool, it is worth noting the city's stance towards *The Sun*, which is widely condemned for its coverage of the Hillsborough disaster and the language of accusation and stigma used towards the city (Cronin, 2017). There is no analysis of coverage from the *The Sun* in this study.
3. These newspapers were not included in the systematic content analysis of the newspapers in this study because of the author's lack of access to their archives.
4. In 1997, after scoring a goal against SK Brann, Fowler removed his football shirt to reveal a t-shirt with the message '500 dockers sacked since September 1995'. Notably, the letters 'C' and 'K' in 'dockers' were larger and visually similar to the logo for the Calvin Klein brand (Carter et al., 2003).

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## Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [ABW], upon reasonable request.

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