WHAT FACTORS SHAPE THE PARTICULAR BRANDING OF THE CITIES?

Primož Pevcin[1]

Abstract

Recently, the utilization of the smart city branding has become increasingly popular in scientific literature as well as in contemporary urban policy-making, where it has been popularized for the purpose of solving complex urban problems, but also value added to utilize this branding for political and marketing purposes of city administrations has been revealed. The scrutinization process reveals that this concept has been indeed popularized in particular after 2015, overtaking in popularity, but often substituting, some other city-branding concepts, like e.g. sustainable city, creative city etc. This could be partly contributed to the logic of terminological neutrality, although city labels or branding are actually political and marketing concepts, that dynamically accommodate their eclectic meanings in time, and this change might not be entirely soundly explained. The important role for the promotion of the particular concept builds on the availability of funding, e.g. research, and thus policy driving features do matter. The question initiating from this is, whether the potential decrease in public funding on smart city related topic would decrease the volume of literature produced. The first signs of this are already starting to emerge, potentially indicating also a fatigue of smart city label, among others. Thus, city labelling can be taken a rather dynamic process, since some labels are gaining and other labels are losing their popularity in time. And new city labels might emerge also in the future, partially also to accommodate the potential necessity to achieve terminological innovativeness. This paper focuses on the review of the existing literature, following mainly manifest content analysis approach, where focus is given to the analysis of factors that shape specific city branding patterns. The purpose is to reveal how those factors shaped the city branding dynamics in the past, and how they might shape it in the future, in particular when acknowledging the emergence of the new context.

Practical relevance

The analysis of the paper focuses on political as well as marketing aspects of city branding, where we analyze the change of the branding in time, and factors contributing to it. Recently, a push, mainly based on the technological factors, has skyrocketed the utilization of the label smart city, which became evident also in the scientific literature. Nevertheless, as this label outpaced some other labels in the past, it is to be expected that similar shift might occur in the future. Following, this analysis focuses on the analysis of factors that might contribute to those shifts, and this, given the political and marketing features of the branding represents a clear value added to the practice.

Keywords

City branding, Smart city, Resilient city, Hazards.

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[1] Ph.D., Associated Professor, University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Public Administration, Gosarjeva ulica 5, SI-1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia, primoz.pevcin@fu.uni-lj.si.

1. Introduction

Smart city concept has become increasingly popular in literature as well as in urban policy-making. Namely, this concept has been popularized for the purpose of solving complex urban problems (like, e.g., social cohesion, environmental sustainability, economic recovery etc.) and is also often politically promoted for local electoral purposes (Nesti, 2020). This suggest that branding of the city as being smart brings also value added to utilize this for political and marketing purposes of city administrations. It is worth noting that smart city concept has a rather fuzzy nature, and, among others, it has a blurry line to similar concepts, like digital city, creative city, intelligent city, knowledge city, sustainable city, resilient city, etc. Moreover, globalization trend creates a growing competition between the cities for investment, so cities need to create a tech-friendly climate in order to attract investment, and smart city branding comes with this purpose neatly (Marcut, 2018).

The result of these pressures is that city administration often make proclamations on their smartness. In order to put some evidence on it, smart solutions, either technological or softer, are targeted. Thus, smart city has become one of buzzwords or labels that has been increasingly used in city branding. However, the challenge remains what the term actually refers to. Thus, it clearly becomes evident that labelling and branding itself as well as the proper utilization of terminology has become "wicked" issue. The argument can be put forward also due to the fact that city labelling and popularity of various buzzwords, like creative, sustainable, digital etc. has changed in time. Thus, city labelling can be taken a rather dynamic process, since some labels are gaining and other labels are losing their popularity in time. And new city labels might emerge also in the future, partially also to accommodate the potential necessity to achieve terminological innovativeness. This paper focuses on the review of the existing literature, following mainly manifest content analysis approach, where focus is given to the analysis of factors that shape specific city branding patterns. The purpose is to reveal how those factors shaped the city branding dynamics in the past, and how they might shape it in the future, in particular when acknowledging the emergence of the new context.

2. Theoretical foundations

The meaning of the label smart city is poorly defined, as several reviews about its definition and features may be found in the literature, offering a wide range of perspectives. For instance, Albino et al. (2015) have provided a list of more than 20 different definitions of the smart city concept, and they argue about the confusion that exists when defining other similar concepts. The element that seems to be shared by all of the various approaches and definitions is the application of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to basic infrastructural services. Silva et.al. (2018) argue that smart city concept represents an agglomerate of other various concepts that utilize ICT, like e.g. digital city, intelligent city, sustainable city, but it is more holistic in nature.

As Gonella (2019) has argued, the current definitions share common keywords that may be divided into two groups, the first group including words like interconnectedness, e-government, ICT, data access, competitiveness, innovation, creative business, entrepreneurship, and smart mobility; whereas the second group includes words like safety, health, smart living, cultural vibrancy, environmental sustainability, and happiness. The first group comprises of technological tools and socio-economic conditions, mostly related to the city itself, while the second group consists of goals and objectives that are more related to the citizens. While there is a presence of both groups of keywords in smartness of the city narratives, there is no clear path defined why and how the tools and operations in the first group should lead to the goals indicated by the second. Thus, this interconnection has been assumed per se, but holistic testing is missing.

Interestingly, Azevedo (2014) has also argued that smart city as branding concept for urban development suffers from a lack of precise content, and often includes wide strategies and categories' considerations that it frequently stays as fuzzy promise or intention in order to maintain concept's supremacy in existing discourses. I.e., the concept itself bears the characteristics of imagination and social aesthetics. Similarly, Hollands (2015) has argued that dominant representations on urban development through the application of ICT is both a positive and inevitable trend are pre-emptive and ideological, as technology itself does not solve all urban problems nor does not make residents happy and cities prosperous. Taking this into consideration, it needs to be understood also how cities function sociologically and politically, as many urban problems are not technological, but social in essence, like poverty and inequality. These problems have often been exacerbated, rather than solved, by technology and city branding strategies, as they do not grant citizen participation per se.

Namely, one of the features of smart cities is the inclination towards mixed public-private endeavors, as (leading) technological companies have important roles both in the provision of technological solutions as well as in branding, since they contribute massively to visibility and relevance of various smart urban projects. The second feature relates towards attracting of highly skilled and talented residents, ranging from entrepreneurs to researches. This combination might generate several pitfalls and dangers, as there can be misunderstanding generated that technology is a goal, rather than just means to increase citizen satisfaction and well-being by contributing to the resolution of urban problems. Besides, technology might curb creativity and innovations, as processes and frameworks can easily become rigid (Kolotouchkina and Seisdedos, 2018). Similarly, Grossi and Pianezzi (2017) have described smart city critique in the form of technological neo-liberal utopia, where business-led technological solutions are favored in comparison to political and long-term urban planning solutions.

Grebosz-Krawczyk (2021) argues that the smart city brand management should rely on building and developing a competitive local identity of a city brand founded on strong distinguished features through the implementation of long-term initiatives together with residents and other stakeholders, thus creating relational and participatory character of the smart city brand. This is important, as smart city branding is based mainly on self-proclamation, and connotation is often that it represents a cross sectional neoliberal project of influential corporations and political elite (Kummitha

and Crutzen, 2017). This is reflected also from the perspectives of external stakeholders, how they perceive what smart city is. Chan et.al. (2019) identify, in this context, four factors, the quality of a smart society, energy consumption in an urban environment, smart city governance and smart city livelihood, where the first two factors are actually the determinants of a successful smart city brand considered by visitors, thus supporting sound policies of smart destination branding.

3. Methods, results and discussion

The evidence suggests that the once prevailing visions of sustainable cities have increasingly been substituted by the ambition to become a smart city as Parks and Rohracher (2019) are arguing. This is evident not just from branding and policy-making in practice, but also from researching funding and publications. In fact, smart city concept has appropriated and colonized sustainable city concept, although there is evidence that debate and reasoning exists and expands on how smartness and technology actually contribute to the sustainability of cities. This has been stressed also by Yigitcanlar (2018), where global climate changes and, in particular, advances in ICT with new technological offerings contributed to the affirmation of smart city concept, which has been seen as a model of contemporary sustainable and ideal city form, i.e. smart city being an efficient, technologically advanced, green and socially inclusive city. At the forefront of this kind of city, technology is put, at this should contribute generating solutions for ecological, societal, economic, and other challenges of modern cities.

The above has been reflected also in the literature, as the evidence portrays a rapid increase in the number of articles dealing with the topic of smart cities during the last few years, in particular during the period 2013-2019. It is also evident, if we compare the number of articles with the affiliation to the funding agencies that there has been increasing support for the research on smart city related topics also from the research funding, which suggests that smart city research is actually also a policy-driven topic. Smart city label is the most frequently used label among other (more or less) closely related concepts or city labels. The rising tide of the utilization of smart city concept can be attributed mainly to the so-called technology push, emphasizing hardware-based aspects, which can be observed also from the literature, which relates at a large margin on computer sciences (Pevcin, 2019).

The potential reasoning behind it might be that label smart is much more politically neutral than the term sustainability, as sustainability has strong progressivist's connotation, which voters might not prefer. In addition, the word smart refers to more instrumental concept that looks for the desired outcome, and smartness is often centered on a user perspective, and entailing strategic directions (Al-Nasrawi et.al., 2015), which gives a concept a rather wise connotation, whereas sustainability refers to a more normative concept. Thus, smart city would actually mean sustainable city, but labels itself is politically more acceptable. Indeed, as Hatuka et.al. (2018) have argued, smart city and other related concepts have morphed over time and have been adjusted to fit the political economies of cities, which suggests that a new concept emerges every decade.

The findings of this research point out to the wicked issue when city categories, concepts or labellings are put forward. The evidence suggests that the label smart city has "exploded" in the literature recently, but also the variations in volume of different fields of science have contributed to this phenomenon, which means that we should not simply take different labels as synonyms. The labelling namely depends also on the time span we are scrutinizing and also on the scientific field the literature is being related to. If the label smart has become popular recently, this does not mean that this label encompasses all the dimensions particular city should care about. Nor does it not mean that other labels are either obsolete or out-of-date (Pevcin, 2019).

Specific evidence suggests that labelling and branding of cities can change in time, as Naef (2020) suggests, when considering the case of Medellin, where the objective of attracting foreign investments and tourists, led the city administration to consecutively brand the city as innovative, smart, sustainable, and finally as a resilient city after 2016, when urban resilience has been emphasized as a core value of the city and its residents. The challenge of boosting resilience of cities is supposed to be further emphasized after the current pandemic, as the growth, sustainability of cities and their ability to attract investment, tourism and talent are extremely vulnerable during times of crisis, which is particularly relevant for larger cities (Fair, 2021).

Furthermore, contrary to smart city, the number of definitions of resilient city is limited, as this is referenced as building capacity within individuals, communities, institutions, businesses, and systems to survive, adapt, and grow regardless of experienced crises and shocks city faces. The two labels have also different roots, the smart city label being promoted by technological companies, whereas international organizations and associations of cities are promoting the label resilient city, as they are concerned mainly with the challenge of increasing city's capabilities to deal with various hazards, i.e. external pressures in the broadest sense. As the concept of resilient city is more defined and institutionalized, contrary to very diverse and self-acclaimed concept of smart city, some authors even suggest that focus on resilience will replace the focus on smart, also including the labelling of cities (van der Bosch, 2017).

This shift can be understood, as during the last few decades, at least three strong urban brands prevailed — i.e., sustainable city, knowledge city, and smart city, but also other brands can be potentially added to the list, like creative city, intelligent city, etc. The discussions have questioned whether these concepts brought the desired outcomes to cities and their development, or they were a branding hoax or a soup of neoliberal ideology (Yigitcanlar, 2018). This would suggest that there is a space for a new brand to emerge and ultimately prevail, not limiting the list to the aforementioned resilient city, but also to new emerging labels like future city, cyber city, autonomous city, etc.

The issue remains whether this shift is already occurring. If we scrutinize Web of Science (2021), some transformations are already occurring. The appearance of labels smart sustainable city and sustainable city shows continuous growth, and results for these labels have peaked in 2020. For the label smart sustainable city, this denoted 234 hits in 2020, in comparison to 48 hits in 2019, whereas for sustainable city this denoted 1,435 hits in 2020, in comparison to 1,087 hits in 2019. Interestingly, although the hits for smart city label still prevail, they have peaked in

2019 with 5,046 hits, but the reduction was experienced in 2020 as (only) 4,430 hits were found. Surprisingly, although we would expect that resilience becomes new buzz word for city branding, this is still obviously not reflected in the scientific literature, as the label utilization received its peak in 2019 with 343 hits, but this number has decreased to 155 in 2020, although the post-pandemic period has still to be experienced. This can potentially be explained also by the focus of resilience on the future challenges, rather than current practices and projects, and also by the relative scarcity of project funds focusing on building resilience, in particular when compared to funds available for financing smart city initiatives. Moreover, as the evidence from the WoS collection suggest, labels like cyber, autonomous or future city are existing in scientific outputs, but they are still rather rare.

4. Conclusion

Thus, city labelling can be taken a rather dynamic process, since some labels are gaining and other labels are losing their popularity in time. In addition, new city labels might emerge in the future, partially also to accommodate the potential necessity to achieve terminological innovativeness. Therefore, the future research should be aware of potential changing patterns, the importance of the concept for different fields of science or the changing political and social acceptability of various labels. Although all labels would like to be associated with the supposed future advancement, development and sustainable urbanization of the cities, they actually bring different understanding, what this future actually means and represents; ranging from ICT, technological, ecological, planning, creative etc. advancement. Furthermore, the issue remains what actually an objective threshold for appropriate labelling is and what a potential self-proclamation bias of labelling is.

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