Keeping a foot in both camps: Sustainability, city branding and boundary spanners

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines sustainable development (SD) within the contemporary practices of city branding, a prominent business philosophy that underpins market-led development strategies of urban areas. In pursuing uniqueness, different cities often seem to hint at the very same themes of differentiation, and this reflects the tendency to embrace pre-given sets of place-development discourses. This work casts a critical perspective on SD as one of the global *passe-partout* themes that has become particularly prominent in contemporary city-brand management practices. In particular, the theory-practice gap in city branding for SD is emphasized and interpreted through the lens of glocalization theories. This viewpoint identifies responsibilized boundary spanners as agents located between the global and local levels that act as mediators in multi-stakeholder networks, ultimately fostering capacities to implement collective actions in city-branding practices.

1. Introduction

Places and destinations have become some of the most favourite objects of investigation in recent marketing and branding research (Giovanardi, Lucarelli, & Pasquinelli, 2013; Green, Grace, & Perkins, 2016; Zenker, Braun, & Petersen, 2017). The increasing application of business philosophies to cities reflects the widely agreed assumption that inter-place competition is a crucial corollary of the contemporary neoliberal scenario (e.g. Chesire, 1999) in which geographical distinctiveness (see Turok, 2009) is of the utmost importance. While much attention in business studies is still being devoted to managerial issues of place-brand effectiveness, a critical research agenda is emerging as a "constructive response to the needs posed to place scholars and managers by place complexity" (Giovanardi, Lichrou, & Kavaratzis, 2018, p. 178). Among the several discursive apparatuses that this research agenda has sought to reveal and redress, the one of sustainability and sustainable development constitutes an area that deserves more explicit critical investigations. In fact, the present viewpoint originates from the recognition of the growing but still occasional engagement that the city-branding literature has shown so far in relation to sustainability. But this engagement lags behind real-world practices such as the recurring "Fridays for Future" demonstrations on the streets of major cities

globally. The following section proposes a review of the current perspectives on sustainability that dominate the city-branding literature, together with some of the main issues that have affected the framing of sustainability among urban scholars and managers. Then, we point out some inspiring avenues that could hopefully encourage more focused efforts in researching how sustainability principles are turned into sustainability practices in shaping inclusive urban identities. The paper's originality lies in the bridging of two concepts: the first is responsibilization, emerging from the neoliberal governmentality literature; the second regards boundary spanners, emerging from sustainability science and organizational studies.

2. Sustainability in city branding: definitional, analytical, and normative limits

There is little novelty in noting that city branding has often resulted into the creation of *copy-and-paste* identity scripts for cities, which have thus tended to embrace pre-given sets of discourses on place development (Evans, 2003). "Creativity", "cultural heritage" or "innovation", either alone or combined with each other, have not seldom created a modular system of empty signifiers (see Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Selg & Ventsel, 2008), where Destination Management Organisations (DMOs),

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consultants and local politicians manufacture different and yet, ironically, similar identities. These sub-systems of empty signifiers, in combination with the term "place branding" (see Glasze, 2007), have tended to create an assemblage of semiotic devices that developed into sorts of *pass-partouts* or megatrends (von Groddeck & Schwarz, 2013). Similarly, we could consider sustainability as another dominant form of city-branding narrative that has gained increasing prominence through the discourse on sustainable development (SD). However, while the SD discourse is part of a megatrend, businesses frequently seem to pay "lip service to sustainability *principles*", while the practices appear to be implemented "only for legal compliance, cutting costs, increasing profits or improving public relations" (Dwyer, 2017, p. 2), and this often misleads consumers while favouring business gains (Font & McCabe, 2017). The phenomenon whereby sustainability principles are subsumed by a neoliberal approach while sustainable practices are disregarded has been called "greenwashing" (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2010). Phenomena such as "greenwashing" epitomize the discrepancy between sustainability principles and practices. This appears to occur because the "business as usual" assumptions underlying the neoliberal economic model hinder the realization of sustainable practices (Dwyer, 2017).

Today, it is difficult to deny the prominence of discourse on SD across several city-management related policies that promise to develop cities in an environmentally-sound manner, enable local development, and ensure the inclusion of stakeholders and citizens in place-development practices. Overall, sustainability is often depicted in the literature as an inherently positive characteristic of a place that can be strengthened through appropriate city-branding campaigns (Pant, 2005; Ryan & Mizerski, 2010). This has consolidated into a set of assumptions that most researchers would not have any reason to challenge, reject or at the very least fine-tune or reformulate. This naïve discourse of sustainability may be potentially dangerous because it could encourage simplistic interpretations of sustainability as a communicational façade of cities and destinations willing to merely allude to sustainability rather than promote it in practice. Indeed, one of the main shortcomings of the debate on SD concerns the difficulties emerging when moving from the rhetoric on global sustainable development to place-specific actions, namely that a "high level of abstraction in the sustainable development debate means that contentious issues are often manifested only at the sector to sub-sector levels" (Nilsson & Persson, 2003, p. 333).

The role of SD has been repetitively championed by different city-branding studies which have celebrated the attempts of cities to communicate the positive connotations of SD (Aitken & Campelo, 2011; Ryan & Mizerski, 2010). The very positive attitude of city-branding commentators towards SD is often accompanied by superficiality. In this regard, Long (2016, p. 156) refers to a "sustainability fix" when discussing how the discourse on agendas for sustainability is extremely malleable; therefore, urban governance often employs "the language of sustainability selectively" to prioritize, for example, economic and environmental concerns over social justice issues. Moreover, the SD discourse is flexible enough to be used to attach positive connotations to different policies and governance measures (Frig & Sorsa, 2018). Therefore, the malleability of the global SD discourse – necessary to allow very diverse countries worldwide to appropriate such discourse – contributes making it a *pass-partout*. However, a shift from displaying a superficial SD communication façade to supporting its implementation means making that discourse relevant at a local administrative level.

3. From theory to urban contexts: the role of boundary spanners

SD discourse has a high level of abstraction – necessary for all places on the globe to be able to appropriate it – but this often makes it difficult for local levels to implement it. In order for SD to be relevant at the local level, it appears necessary to undertake a local "translation" or adaptation (Birchall & Bonnett, 2021). According to glocalisation theories, this translation happens when global qualities are appropriated at the local level (Craig & Douglas, 2006). In Roudometof's (2016) terms, if the

waves of globalisation are not refracted through the local, then the global remains abstract in nature; it keeps being a global space that failed to become a place, as the portion of space is not filled with meanings attributed to human experience (Roudometof, 2019).

From this perspective, it appears that the actualization of SD discourse requires active work carried out by intermediaries. Sustainability science has defined these intermediaries as "change agents", or boundary spanners, that is, agents carrying out boundary work. "Active boundary work is therefore required to construct and manage effectively the interfaces among various stakeholders engaged in harnessing knowledge to promote action" (Clark et al., 2016, p. 4615). Examples of actors carrying out boundary work may leverage their ties to multiple professional communities, such as academics with past industry experience, former entrepreneurs or trade associations leaders then turned into consultants or local government officers that are capable to 'translate' the recommendations of academic consultants into intelligible administrative procedures. Different studies have identified the need of boundary-spanning actors as an essential component in multi-stakeholder cooperation if theories are to be put into practice (Lundberg, 2013; van Meerkerk & Edelenbos, 2014) in order to attain SD.

Sustainability science and organizational literature identify boundary spanners as intermediaries among diverse actors who have different objectives, interests, and languages, in order to align them with the implementation of shared solutions (van Meerkerk & Edelenbos, 2014). From this perspective, boundary spanners should take charge of "trickling down" a global discourse to the local level by enacting practices and engaging stakeholders.

This process can be related to a term in the literature known as responsibilization. As pointed out by O'Malley (2009, p. 276) responsibilization is "a term developed in the governmentality literature to refer to the process whereby subjects are rendered individually responsible for a task which previously would have been the duty of another – usually a state agency – or would not have been recognized as a responsibility at all. The process is strongly associated with neoliberal political discourses, where it takes on the implication that the subject being responsibilized has avoided this duty or the responsibility has been taken away from them in the welfare-state era and managed by an expert or government agency". Responsibilization in our context specifically refers to how societal issues underlying SD discourse – such as hunger, climate change, inequality, etc. – are addressed by diverse actors via different practices (see Eckhardt & Dobscha, 2019).

However, the responsibilization approach treated in the literature on neoliberal governmentality ascribes freedom and autonomy to individuals and agents "while simultaneously appealing to individual responsibility-taking, independent self-steering and 'self-care'" (Pyysiäinen, Halpin, & Guilfoyle, 2017, p. 216). In fact, the neoliberal responsibilization theory addresses how individuals appropriate the SD discourse via *individual* sustainable practices, while implying that *collective* actions are needed (Lange, Driessen, Sauer, Bornemann, & Burger, 2013). This also indicates why it might be easy to appropriate the SD discourse, but then it is difficult to actually implement multi-stakeholder participatory governance for SD via collective actions.

This viewpoint proposes the merging of responsibilization (governmentality literature) and boundary spanners (sustainability science and organizational literature) by interpreting agents located between the global and local levels as responsibilized boundary spanners who - through boundary work – can become responsibilizators of multi-stakeholder networks (Table 1). Table 1 compares the governance approach in responsibilization (neoliberal governmentality) and in boundary spanners literature (sustainability science and organizational literature), and proposes a bridging of these concepts towards responsibilized boundary spanners. This implies that boundary spanners should be responsibilized by the global SD discourse in order to enable the glocalisation process to happen. By appropriating the global discourse to fill it with meanings shared at the local level, they ultimately seem to "translate" a global space into a local place, acting as

Table 1
Bridging of responsibilization and boundary spanners concepts.

Dimensions	Governance approach in Responsibilization (neoliberal governmentality)	Governance approach in Boundary spanners (sustainability science; organizational literature)	Bridging: Responsibilized boundary spanners
Individual vs Collective actions	Neoliberal governmentality represents a form of governance relying on the praxis of responsibilization (Pyysiäinen et al., 2017). Responsibilization in this context indicates that individuals rather than institutions become responsible of addressing societal issues (e.g. climate change) via individual practices (Eckhardt & Dobscha, 2019).	Issues such as climate change, water use, etc., present some of the most significant threats to the planet, society, and organizations. These issues, directly related to SD, are different from other issues because "they involve common pool resources—all users affect the resource and no users can be excluded". (Bowen, Bansal, & Slawinski, 2018, p.1412).	If responsibilization concept is essential in making individuals aware of societal challenges related to SD, individual practices cannot solve collective problems requiring collaborative actions. Boundary spanners are essential to mediate between knowledge and action (Clark et al., 2016).
	"Neo-liberal responsibilization is unique in that it assumes a moral agency which is congruent with the attributed tendencies of economic-rational actors" (Shamir, 2008, p. 7): "consequences of the action are borne by the subject alone, who is also solely responsible for them" (Lemke, 2001, p. 201).	Such issues are characterized by "complexity, uncertainty, large temporal and spatial scales, and irreversibility, and will require innovative, participatory, and multiparty approaches to solve them" (Safford, Sawyer, Kocher, Hiers, & Cross, 2017, p.560) Boundary spanners are important to build trust in multi-stakeholder governance networks (van Meerkerk & Edelenbos, 2014) and have a dedicated job/ responsibility to work in collaborative environments.	In our context, knowledge related to SD is global in nature (e.g. Sustainable Development Goals) but requires practices (action) at local level to be implemented. Accordingly, agents responsibilized by the global SD principles (knowledge) are essential in local contexts to enable sustainable practices (action). In particular, they are crucial mediators of both vertical global-local (knowledge-action) approaches to SD, as well as horizontal mediators enabling cooperation among diverse set of stakeholders with different needs and agendas to implement sustainable practices requiring collective action.
From theory to practice	Responsibilization is "the practical link that connects the ideal-typical scheme of governance to actual practices on	"Boundary spanners occupy a pivotal and powerful role as intermediaries able to filter, direct, subvert,	Boundary spanners can represent a critical component in multi-stakeholder networks. They create conditions to improve cognitive

Table 1 (*continued*)

Dimensions	Governance approach in Responsibilization (neoliberal governmentality)	Governance approach in Boundary spanners (sustainability science; organizational literature)	Bridging: Responsibilized boundary spanners
	the ground" (Shamir, 2008, p.7).	dilute and channel the nature and flow of information spanning multiple communication boundaries" (Williams, 2013, pp. 20–21).	closeness and to facilitate development of interpersonal relationships, covering a dynamic processual role needed if theoretical structures are to be put into practice (Lundberg, 2013). They should be "capable of responding to the changing interests of actors on both sides of the boundary, able to inform and transform the practices of all involved parties" (Safford et al., p.561).

mediators of global-local relations (Craig & Douglas, 2006) in terms of transforming knowledge (principles) to action (practices). Through boundary work, agents enable global qualities to be appropriated at the local level, ultimately acting as responsibilizators of different stakeholders by making SD relevant within their context (place-based approach).

While the academic literature has only very recently emphasized the importance of boundary spanners in creating connections between place-branding theory and practice (e.g. Hospers, 2020), the literature on network governance (e.g. Mees, Uittenbroek, Hegger, & Driessen, 2019) and management (Williams, 2013) identifies these agents as skilled networkers that are able to bridge different interests, connect different stakeholders in collaborative environments and promote dialogue to create shared interest towards common action.

Different types of actors can fill the role of boundary spanners acting as responsibilizators, depending on the network and its objectives, as well as stakeholder configuration. For example, in the work of Rinaldi, Cavicchi, & Robinson, 2020 this role of enabling multi-stakeholder co-creational processes for city-branding purposes is covered by academics involved in third mission activities and supporting communities that realize SD. Alexander, Teller, and Wood (2020) identify store managers as boundary spanners able to address the interplay of geographically-bounded retail and a city as an augmentation of a place product and brand. Therefore, identifying and involving responsibilized boundary spanners in city-branding efforts appear increasingly important to re-engage with SD implementation issues, starting with the work carried out by actors "on the ground". This appears particularly urgent in the current COVID-19 pandemic that has provoked a number of disruptions affecting city-branding practices. For example, tourism is in an unprecedented crisis, and it faces a collapse of the entire sector, which now requires a rethinking towards more sustainable trajectories (Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2020) that are able to reorient tourism according to the rights and needs of local communities (Pasquinelli & Trunfio, 2020). Many businesses around the world have become bankrupt or required a complete restructuring to be able to comply with COVID-19 hygiene measures, restrictions and recommendations (e.g. maintaining distance; limiting the number of people in facilities, etc.). These disruptions might

represent an opportunity to rethink city-branding practices towards more sustainable trajectories and avoid a return to a "business as usual" model based on a paradigm of mere growth. Moreover, COVID-19 has contributed to redefining global-local relations between states and regions, further highlighting the need for mediators of both vertical (global-local) and horizontal (among different stakeholder categories) relations to enable the capacity to implement collective actions in city-branding practices. In line with the current perspectives highlighted, this viewpoint emphasizes the increasing relevance of boundary spanners (e.g. Goodrich et al., 2020). They are well-placed to support evidence-based policy within multi-stakeholder decision-making processes, particularly in the post-pandemic recovery framework.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Chiara Rinaldi: Conceptualization; Writing – original draft; writing – review & editing project administration; funding acquisition

Massimo Giovanardi: Conceptualization; Writing – original draft; writing – review & editing

Andrea Lucarelli: Conceptualization; Writing – original draft; writing – review & editing

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Acknowledgments

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