Regimes of Visibility: Unravelling Media, Conflict and Hegemony in Place Branding Processes

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Abstract

This chapter explores the intricacies of media, conflict, and hegemony in processes of place branding, with a particular focus on 'regimes of visibility'. Nowadays, place branding has become a ubiquitous feature of urban environments. While bottom-up and citizen-led approaches have gained popularity for their promise of communal ownership, recent evidence challenges the notion that citizens have ultimate control over brand development. To gain a better understanding, this chapter reads place brands as 'regimes of visibility', narrative and affective representations of urban spaces with performative effects. The chapter emphasizes the critical role of media in shaping place branding processes, pinpointing the impact of news, magazines, and user-generated content on social media platforms. It then goes on to analyse the case study of NoLo (Milan), a bottom-up place branding process, exploring the role of media in shaping the regime of visibility, analysing the conflicts arising over its control, and the competition with other regimes for the hegemonic representation. These findings have far-reaching implications for understanding the relationship between place brands, urban spaces, and their actors.

Introduction

Place branding processes are ubiquitous in contemporary urbanscapes (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015; Rius Ulldemolins, 2014). Quoting Andy Pike (in Vanolo, 2018), they have become 'the snake oil of territorial modernisation dreams'. The branding frenzy has invested the city level as well as the more granular level, with distinctively branded neighbourhoods aspiring to become the 'coolest places' where to live and hang out – in the eyes of the new cultural and creative urban middle class (Ocejo, 2017). As such, local administrations have welcomed city and neighbourhood branding plans, to strengthen their position in the new international competition between cities (McCann, 2004).

Place branding processes, spearheaded by urban growth coalitions (Cleave & Arku, 2022), contribute to the commercialization and gentrification of the interested urban areas (Semi, 2015; Vanolo, 2018; Zukin, 2010). This has led to the question of who should control the branding processes, with bottom-up, citizen-led, or co-creation approaches gaining popularity for their supposed ability to ensure communal ownership of the brand (Aitken & Campelo, 2011). However, recent evidence (Coletti & Rabbiosi, 2021; Gerosa & Tartari, 2021) challenges this assumption, suggesting that even if citizens have a key role in developing a brand this does not necessarily give them primary control over it. Such an automatism oversimplifies and lacks a thorough understanding of the relationship between urban spaces, their actors, and place brands. New concepts are necessary to assess if place brands actually have the potential to support citizens' 'right to the city' (Masuda & Bookman, 2018), rather than just being tools for commodification.

This chapter delves into the debates surrounding the right to the brand and the theories of visibility put forth by Brighenti (2007) and Vanolo (2018). It employs the concept of 'regime of visibility', which argues that place brands can be interpreted as specific narrative and affective representations of urban spaces, which have performative effects on them. Regimes of visibility are constantly evolving, shaped by various actors in conflict for control over their meanings, and competing with other regimes for the hegemonic representation and symbolic identity of a particular territory. Viewing place brands as regimes of visibility provides a more detailed and nuanced understanding of how they develop over time in terms of their identity, usage, trajectories, and interaction with an urban territory. In particular, this approach emphasizes the crucial role of media, whether

it be news and magazine articles or user-generated content on social media platforms, in shaping these processes.

This chapter will first provide a definition of regimes of visibility, to then apply the new conceptualisation to the case study of NoLo, in Milan (Italy), which is relevant for being a bottom-up place branding process (Gerosa & Tartari, 2021) started by a community of inhabitants through forms of leisure activism (Citroni & Coppola, 2020). It will focus on how media have played a critical role in shaping the regime of visibility of NoLo, its performative effects, the conflict for the control of the regime of visibility, and the competition between the regime of visibility of NoLo and the one of Via Padova – framed in critically different ways by (often the same) media – for the hegemonic representation of the territory. Finally, a final section discusses some implications emerging from the findings.

Media's role in gentrification and place branding literature

Media have always been considered a someway natural component of the 'urban growth machine' (Meeting, 1999; Molotch, 1976; Wilson & Mueller, 2004), with a normative power dimension (McCann, 2004) in setting standards of 'good places' to live and promoting gentrification processes. Bowler and McBurney (1991) in their seminal analysis of the East Village gentrification already highlighted two fundamental roles played by media in these processes, which are still valid today. First, media become functional to gentrification when they enact one of their very common practices: shaping cultures of fear (Glassner, 2010) spatialised in the urban space (Tulumello, 2015), particularly around so-called 'deprived areas'. These cultures of fear are fundamental on one side to justify the rhetoric of urban redevelopment, and on the other to grow the area's appeal for the new hip middle-class in search of convenient but authentic places. Second, the media tend to highlight some aesthetics, narratives and practices while ignoring others. Notably, both these features are not necessarily the outcome of serving growth machines' agendas: they are well rooted in what can be considered media normal functioning. Furthermore, in the seminal *Loft Living* Zukin (1982) highlights the controversial consideration the artists of SoHo held toward the media: they recognised magazine articles as fundamental for their notoriety and decided to use media as allies, continuing nevertheless to fear the possible consequences of this alliance. The ambiguity of middle-class artists and creative workers towards media adds itself to the set of contradictions of a social group that predicates openness, inclusivity and cosmopolitanism but ends up displacing previous inhabitants, and

willing to live in more authentic ways ends up acting as the vanguard of real estate developers in the difficult terrains of popular neighbourhoods (Ley, 1996, 2003).

Recently, the relationship between media and gentrification has been affected by two significant phenomena. Firstly, on an urban level, processes of place branding led by growth coalitions have diffused widely and influenced gentrification (Cleave & Arku, 2022). Secondly, on a media level, digital media and social networks have emerged as crucial actors in cultivating and maintaining a sense of belonging and emotional attachment to places, potentially deepening inequalities between areas (Halegoua & Polson, 2021). These two phenomena are closely intertwined, as digital platforms provide a space for positive discourse and community building around urban branding (Breek et al., 2018). Despite media directly addressing the gentrification debate display both support and criticism (Brown-Saracino & Rumpf, 2011), everyday casual digital media content plays a crucial role in fuelling place branding processes by uncritically reproducing dominant narratives about places (Mullenbach et al., 2021).

Given the relevance of the phenomenon, there is a paucity of critical reflections on it. An exception is Gutsche's (2015) theorisation of 'boosterism', 'everyday news that promotes mediatised notions of a community's dominant traditions, dominant identities, and potential for future prosperities' (ibidem, p.497). Boosterism operates as a form of social control through a combination of community building and social banishment, excluding certain social groups by the dominant narratives, identities and social spaces (ibidem). Thus, this article assumes the theorisation of boosterism as a fundamental working mechanism of media in place branding processes. Boosterism operates both in direct – glorifying the authentic and creative distinctive vibe of the area (Rius Ulldemolins, 2014) – and indirect ways.

Overall, the literature appears quite homogeneous, illustrating an established set of functions played by media in the reinforcement of place branding – and consequently, gentrification – processes. They promote narratives of insecurity and degradation of poor neighbourhoods functional to the acceptance of the 'revitalisation' phenomena; they boost the creative and authentic vibe of the areas affected by the place branding process and of the waves of new hipster retailers accompanying it, reinforcing the attractiveness for new hip middle-class inhabitants and the sense of belonging of the new gentrifying communities; they do so while interacting in complex ways with other urban actors and–

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willingly or implicitly – selectively highlighting some features of the places and ignoring others.

Significantly, most of the existing research has analysed gentrification or place branding processes led by clearly identifiable growth machines, aggregated around predominant corporate (often Real Estate) or political interests, with media playing a clearly subordinate and functional role. Strom and Kerstein's (2017) analysis of a middle-sized American city revitalisation process provides an exception to this tendency: they argue that the development process was not led by a predominant interest nor by a unified set of actors, but rather by a 'diverse range of interests, including many small businesses, downtown residents, real estate investors, preservationists, and elected and appointed officials' (Ibidem, p. 514) with a social entrepreneurial logic, both progressively idealistic and market-driven. However, the media remained in the background of such an analysis. This chapter contributes to this line of inquiry, by analysing the role of media in contexts characterised by social entrepreneurial governance, resulting from the interaction between multiple different actors. Furthermore, existing literature has focused on the consequences of media content production on gentrification processes and place branding. The question of how media contents in these contexts interact with the symbolic meanings of an area and with other actors has been much less explored. The concept of urban regimes of visibility helps shed light on this issue.

Urban regimes of visibilities: a definition

A growing critical line of inquiry on place branding stresses it as a non-neutral process (Vanolo, 2018), which actively modifies the visibility and invisibilities of the urban space and all related actors and phenomena. This approach argues that the current ubiquity of branded cities and neighbourhoods makes it urgent to open critical debates on 'the right to the brand' (echoing the renowned right to the city conceptualised by Lefebvre), considering the city or neighbourhood brands a site and source of symbolic conflict and struggle (Masuda & Bookman, 2018), where local inhabitants voices' and agency must be considered not only as a force functional to the brand implementation (Braun et al., 2013) but as a litmus test to assess the process from a social justice perspective and also a potential source of counter-branding processes from below (Masuda & Bookman, 2018). Recent empirical research (Coletti & Rabbiosi, 2021) applied this framework – analysing brands as social constructions forged by multiple voices – to the case study of an inhabitants-led branding of a marginal neighbourhood in Rome. The findings suggest that inhabitants-led

reappropriations of the right to the brand are possible in the urban space, but with open ambiguities: the success of the new place branding creates the conditions – independently from the inhabitants' will – for its eventual appropriation and strategic use by external actors, yearning to capitalise on it through gentrification processes. This leaves the question open if a factual 'right to the brand' is possible, or if the brand possesses an intrinsic logic that favours the aestheticisation and paves the way to the commercialisation of the urban space for real estate developers and other corporate actors.

Vanolo (2018), combining the thought of Foucault with the one of Rancière, interprets city branding as a powerful tool for the subjectivation of the cities, that is, for the normative formulation of the social identity through which the urban space gets represented and should be experienced. However, this subjectivation process is selective, depending on specific 'partitions of the sensible': place branding gives subjectivity to specific issues and phenomena, leaving others invisible. A consequence of such a selective subjectivation is the codification of a limited set of legitimate narratives and aesthetic imaginaries to which all successful branded urban places tend to conform, in line with what Zukin (2010) has argued about to the conforming effects of the imperative of authenticity in neighbourhoods. Alongside the investigation into the "right to the brand," independent research has examined the role of media in gentrification processes. This research has come to similar conclusions, further pointing out the similarities between the functioning mechanisms of place branding and media representations related to a particular area. Bronsvoort and Uitermark (2022) argue that social media representations of urban spaces tend to selectively reinforce visual and discursive places and practices preferred by gentrifiers while hiding others, a process of 'amplified gentrification' accelerating and deepening urban inequalities in gentrifying neighbourhoods. Tolfo and Douchet (2021) stress that gentrifiers' selective gaze permeates even the critical media coverage of gentrification: when media discuss the fears and threats of gentrification, they focus on the ones experienced by first-wave middle-class gentrifiers, ignoring the ones of the displaced working-class and marginalised inhabitants.

This chapter adds to the ongoing investigation of the connection between media content and the urban environment. It does so by employing the concept of 'regime of visibility' in relation to place brands, drawing from Brighenti's (2007, 2010) theories on visibility regimes. For Brighenti, (2007, p. 324) visibility 'lies at the intersection of the two domains of aesthetics (relations of perception) and politics (relations of power). When these

two terms are understood in a sufficiently broad meaning, it makes sense to say that the medium between the two domains of aesthetics and politics is the symbolic'. Thus, I argue that the production and consumption of media contribute to a normative fictive visual representation (Overton & Murray, 2016) of an urban space, which purposely plays – promoting, exploiting or hiding – with the symbolic meanings and the affective atmosphere (Preece et al., 2022) associated to it. By interpreting the urban territory not simply as a place of relations between actors but as a processual and directional entity (Brighenti, 2010), and media production – in journalism as well as in the broader dominion of user-generated contents – as an urban practice (Rodgers, 2013), it becomes evident that such regimes of visibility have a performative effect on the urban space itself.

At least four dimensions can be identified in which an urban regime of visibility interacts with and have a performative effect on the urban space. First, it becomes a tool for the production and stabilisation of territories through the carving of their symbolic and geographical boundaries, which calls to question which type of individual or collective agency is involved in the boundary-drawing activity, how is the drawing made, what type of drawing is being made, and why (Brighenti 2010, p. 477). Second, regimes of visibility playing with the symbolic identity of places can operate for urban actors as tools of recognition – claiming belonging to a place or its appropriation – and control (De Backer, 2019). Third, they allow to interpret place branding as a tool to strategically enhance the visibility of certain aspects of an urban space and hid others (Brighenti 2007, p. 333). Thus, the regimes of visibility associated with a specific urban brand cause some social actors, places and phenomena to get under the spotlights into a condition of supra-visibility, an overflow of media attention (with potential multiplicative effects), becoming key reference points for the new territorial identity, while others into a condition of invisibility, translating in social and symbolic exclusion from the new territorial identity. Fourth, following Lefebvre's re-reading of Gramsci, regimes of visibility's ultimate meter of success is their hegemonic status in the everyday life of the urban space (Kipfer, 2008; Tang, 2017). This also implies the existence of a complex interplay between concurrent regimes of visibility of different nature, highlighting the need to include issues of power and inequality in the analysis.

Methodological notes

The ethnographic research at the base of this chapter is part of a larger research project held by the author for his PhD, conducted in the neighbourhood of NoLo mainly

from November 2017 to May 2018, with further frequentation of the area in the following months. The empirical data collected during these studies involved participant observation by the author at various events, bars or cafes, and public spaces in the area. The empirical material directly used for this chapter also includes seven in-depth interviews, including one with an owner of a bar, three with notable members of the NoLo community, one with one coiner of the social district name, and two with journalists who had written key newspaper or blog articles on NoLo. The author selected interviewees with a purposive homogeneous strategy (Campbell et al., 2020), and focused on those most relevant to the development of NoLo as a territorial brand. Ethnographic research standards were followed by anonymizing all names for privacy. Collected empirical material was analysed through thematic analysis (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014).

In addition to the empirical material conducted as part of the PhD research project, the chapter also makes use of content analysis (Drisko & Maschi, 2015) to analyse a corpus of newspaper articles related to NoLo and via Padova. Through Lexis Nexis, all the articles in Italian language from newspapers included in the database containing the 'NoLo + Milano' and 'via Padova + Milano' keywords between March 2016 (when the first article on NoLo was published) and December 2019 were collected, downloaded and converted into a csv format. This brought to a final dataset composed of 1561 articles, 239 related to NoLo and 1312 related to via Padova. This dataset has been analysed through structural topic model techniques (Roberts et al., 2017), an unsupervised content technique allowing to identify 'topics' (i.e., a bag of tightly related words) transversal to the corpus and to make interact the topics with variables pertaining to the single documents (in our case, the articles). After running some diagnostic tests, a number of 30 topics have been chosen. The analysis included regressions with the single topics as dependent variables and the 'place' – identifying if the article discussed NoLo or via Padova – as the independent content variable, to find which topics were correlated in a statistically significant way either with articles on NoLo or on via Padova. The results of the stm analysis are illustrated in Figure 1.

Media's shaping of the regime of visibility of NoLo

NoLo is now an official toponym recognised by the municipality of Milan as a *nucleus of local identity* for a rather small semi-pericherical area that stands just outside the 'external ring road' of Milan. NoLo stands for *North of Milan*, in a direct reference to the SoHo and all the other cool place brands in New York. It has been coined by some

creative residentials in 2013 and, after a period of low-key informal diffusion by inhabitants, it started to be used in 2016 by a Facebook group willing to become a reference point for all the community of recently immigrated cultural and creative workers, in search of affordable housing in a convenient place (Gerosa & Tartari, 2021). Together with the group, new hipster businesses and media were fundamental actors for the success of the new place brand (ibidem). The area had not a strong previous identity, which facilitated the diffusion of the new place brand, but 'suffered' the symbolic influence of via Padova, a long road which passes through its eastern half and that has a long history as the 'Bronx of Milan'.

The interest towards the media's role in the branding process of the NoLo neighbourhood began during the fieldwork. Indeed, when I interviewed some of the organisers of the *NoLo Social District*, the Facebook group at the heart of the branding process, the controversial relationship with the media was immediately evident. Media were accused of depicting a fictive reality which simply wasn't consistent with the actual one:

Media narrative comes first, rather than the real neighbourhood. People that write articles about NoLo often have never been here but write to them by hearsay. I wrote an article about bars for ****, in which I reported that this is the district of fried chicken, kebabs for 1.8 € and massages with a happy ending, this is the reality! So young people who arrive today drawn by the articles they read from the Milanese Imbruttito [a local, influential blog] *or Vice then stop at the Pasteur station* [the local subway station]*, because they do not recognise what they see from what they read.* (Paolo)

As the NoLo brand started to gain attention and become a trendy topic, the allure of capitalise on it brought to a multiplication of articles – from reputable newspapers and more frequently by semi-amatorial blogs or web magazines – exalting NoLo for its presumed symbolic values, drew from the generic stereotype of the creative, hipster urban district. The consequence is the disorientation felt by visitors coming to NoLo for the first time, due to the distance between the expected and the experienced visibility. The description from Paolo resonated with my own experience as an avid reader of articles on NoLo and *flâneur* of the urban space during my fieldwork on various occasions, exemplified by the following one:

I am returning from an event at community gardens in via Padova and I decide to cut across Parco Trotter to shorten my path. While I walk, I am reading an article from an unknown web magazine, that sparked much debate in the Social District Facebook Group. One passage strikes me, in which the author talks about Parco Trotter: "If only yesterday the Parco Trotter was a place known for drug problems, today it is the fulcrum around which hipsters, florist designers, bikers and bicycles, artists of all kinds with long hats and beard revolve. A whole generation of artists and creatives has regained the area". I look around myself as I pass through it. I do not see anyone resembling the article description, rather it is full of kids of various ethnic origins that run and play together, watched by parents; on the left, at the volleyball camp two teams of transgender women have a match [I will later discover that they regularly meet there to play volley on the weekend]*, while a little further on, on a low wall, three young Latin American girls with a stereo playing reggaeton very loudly are learning to twerk. It is a place full of life, with many different people relaxing and playing together, but it has nothing to do with the description made in the article.* (Ethnographic notes)

As Paolo, I had the impression that the author probably never set foot in the park but was willing to join the bandwagon, capitalising on the place branding process at the media level. Interestingly, my experience was different from both the current and past depicted visibilities: it was not a fulcrum of hipsters of all kinds nor a place infested by drug dealers. However, it was consistent with my other visits and the peculiar history of the park, animated for decades by a lively local association. What the article did before anything else was to erase its specificity, to depict it according to the codified narrative of a generic park in a generic redeveloping neighbourhood, going from urban blight to hipsterfication.

The same organisers of the Social District recognised, however, the invaluable contribution brought by the media. They mentioned one article by a national newspaper as hugely influential for the initial success of the Social District and the NoLo brand. The author of the article, who lives in the neighbourhood, when interviewed described it as a case of 'heterogony of ends': asked to write an article by her editor, she thought of the emerging NoLo phenomenon. Her opinion about her article was ambivalent: as a journalist, she felt proud to have produced the first press investigation of the area, interviewing the pioneers of NoLo and foreseeing the phenomenon; as a person involved in via Padova

promotion and social activist, she felt concerned to potentially contributing to the gentrification of the area. In her words:

The article is born from me. I live here in the area since 2009 and I am always an activist in Centri Sociali [Centri Sociali are a peculiar Italian form of political autonomous social centres] *so I started to realise what was happening at the supermarket, as long beards started to multiply; then discussing with a friend it came out that a group of designers also started to name it NoLo. We worked a lot with a group of friends on via Padova identity. So, when my editor-in-chief asked me to give some proposals for an article, I talked to her about this ongoing process and she agreed.* (Diana)

When made aware of the NoLo Social District organiser's opinion on the pivotal reference of her article, she contended it. In her opinion, her article had a small circulation and was mainly a second article, the one by a web blog, responsible for the media diffusion of NoLo. She seems right: looking at the initial publication of the articles on the respective Facebook pages, the first has 157 likes, 1 comment and 93 shares, while the second has 1060 likes, 321 comments and 408 shares (post statistics accessed 27/03/2023).

The birth of the blog article is also highly significant, to capture the overlooked role of blogs and web magazines, the semi-amatorial layer of news media. Its author explained that he wrote the blog post after viewing the first article on social media, following his standard routine: scroll major newspaper news looking for promising viral topics and dedicate a blog post to that same subject, with enough changes to not be reportable. Displaying a clear-cut click-baiting editorial policy, he elucidated why NoLo became one of their favourite keywords:

I know it can appear a nasty practice, but every time we devote an article to a controversial celebrity, like Chiara Ferragni or Carlo Cracco to make some examples, we collect tons of views...and NoLo functions in that way, it is a trendy topic that also creates a lot of debate and is easily shared by our community of fans, so it is perfect. (Mirko)

The performativity of NoLo's regime of visibility and the conflict for its control

Even in the absence of clear commercial interests of media over the area, the combination of heterogony of ends and click-baiting journalism gave life to a codified regime of visibility, depicting NoLo as a new stereotypical hipster and creative

neighbourhood. This regime of visibility intensified as other reputable and amateurish media joined the bandwagon, with multiplicative effects also on user-generated content. Once the media started to give recognition to the new place brand, they contributed to the diffusion of it on social networks. On Instagram – which can be considered the 'visual' social network per excellence – in March 2019 (when fieldwork's empirical material was analysed) posts geotagged in 'NoLo' were already 8096 against the 2272 geotagged in via Padova. By March 2023 (when this chapter is being written) the divide has dramatically increased: posts geotagged in NoLo are about 47300, while the ones in via Padova are about 5000. The ratio has passed from 3.5:1 to 9.4:1. Furthermore, currently at least 31 Instagram pages exist using the NoLo place brand in their name, spanning from local businesses to community-led projects to simple photo accounts. The regime of visibility associated with NoLo, once surpassed a certain threshold, has benefitted from a condition of supra-visibility, with multiplicative effects. Empirically, what is observable is a self-sustaining symbolic growth machine that feeds itself, like an ouroboros: media overproduction over NoLo makes it known and attractive in the eyes of the creative *milieu* of newcoming inhabitants looking for recognition which, in turn, increases its over-representation on social networks make it an even more attractive keyword for click-baiting media.

In this context, the NoLo Social District Facebook group became an influential multiplier of the 'viral load' of the web content too. In the digital as in the territorial level: the related community created local 'big events' – such as the *SanNoLo* musical festival (a wordplay with *Sanremo*, the most famous Italian one) or the *NoLo Fringe Festival*, named after the Edinburgh one – which benefitted from and contributed to the supra-visibility of NoLo as a creative and hipster neighbourhood. Other actors joined, strengthening the regime of visibility of NoLo while opening the doors to commercialisation and gentrification processes. Examples include new 'hipster' businesses using NoLo in the name; *BienNolo*, 'the biennial art festival of the multi-ethnic district of creativity of Milan'; installations of the *FuoriSalone*, the series of events during the *Milan Design Week*. NoLo even became the new artistic identity of a well-known hip-hop Italian rapper and producer, Bassi Maestro, launching the *North of Loreto* project after the place brand. Obviously, among the first to diffusely use the brand were also estate agents, using the brand to advertise rents and sales in the area.

NoLo community members created their own media channels, demonstrating the will to gain more control over the regime of visibility. A local web radio, *Radio NoLo,* was

created in 2017, acting as a megaphone for the community and the territory. Significantly, the debut program of *Radio NoLo* was a radio drama titled 'NoLo doesn't exist', which plot involved an evil-minded large development investor assembling a large growth machine (including media) to strategically exploit the NoLo brand to gentrify the area. Ultimately, new and old inhabitants united and defeated the evil investor schemes, who brought his gentrifying interests beyond. However, in reality, not everyone was convinced that NoLo's development as a place brand was devoid of gentrification risks.

If Radio NoLo was an attempt by *Nolers* to 'reform' the regime of visibility associated with NoLo, other inhabitants thought the intrinsic logic of the brand – regardless of the organisers' intentions – was leading directly to gentrification, social exclusion and the death of the real authenticity of the area. Some of them ironically coined and promoted the *Quasi Loreto* place brand ('almost Loreto' in English), abbreviated in *QuLo* (which sounds very similar to the Italian word for ass), as a parodistic subvertising. Others, such as the historical autonomous social centre *Leoncavallo SPA,* affixed provocative posters in the neighbourhood stating 'NoLo, the stupidity of poor that, faking to be rich, raised their living costs by themselves'. In short, as the regime of visibility of NoLo passed from being a tool of recognition used by newcomers to claim their belonging to the neighbourhood to be a tool of control, exerting normative power over all the territory under the new boundaries of NoLo, conflicts over the control of the symbolic meanings of the territory begun.

The regimes of visibility of NoLo vis-à-vis via Padova

If NoLo is – by its very toponym – the 'SoHo of Milan', via Padova has repeatedly been labelled by media as the 'Bronx of Milan': it has been subject along the years of a consistent regime of visibility depicting it as an area blighted by urban decay, crimes, drug, and migrants.

The results of the structural topic model analysis of the dataset of newspaper articles related to NoLo and via Padova highlight the critical role held by media in creating different regimes of visibility. As a preliminary result, there is a significant overlap in the discussion of the two, but it is strongly unbalanced: 27% of newspaper articles discussing NoLo also mention via Padova, while 9% of news articles discussing via Padova also mention NoLo, indicating that the regime of visibility of NoLo strategically uses via Padova way more than the opposite. When analysing the correlations between topics and toponyms, a clear-cut

distinction between the two regimes of visibility becomes evident. It should be noted that LexisNexis only grants access to articles published by recognized newspapers, which means that the vast collection of online blogs and magazines that contribute to the alternative level of exposure are excluded. This also explains the discrepancy in the number of articles between the two categories. Nevertheless, the findings (as shown in Figure 1) serve as further evidence of the impact that semi-professional and amateur creators can have on mainstream professional journalism.

All the topics significantly correlated – from a statistical point of view – to via Padova have a direct relation with the stereotypical regime of visibility of blighted urban areas: topic 22 relates to robberies and arrests; topic 23 relates to the political debate mainly raised by right politicians to denounce the urban decay of the area and the left responsibility in it; topic 19 relates to police investigations; topic 5 relates to drug dealing and requisitions; topic 14 relates to lack of urban security and fights in the streets; topic 13 relates to migrants and the menace they pose. On the opposite, all the topics statistically correlated to NoLo have a direct correlation with the regime of visibility sketched in the previous section: topic 21 relates to requalification interventions, also in relation to the local municipality; topic 16 relates to the activities promoted by the Social District; topic 29 relates to the vivid multi-ethnic and artistic atmosphere of the neighbourhood; topic 27 relates to design and creativity as tools for urban requalification; topic 24 relates to festivals, cinema and spectacles; topic 20 relates to concerts; topic 12 to the vibrant nightlife.
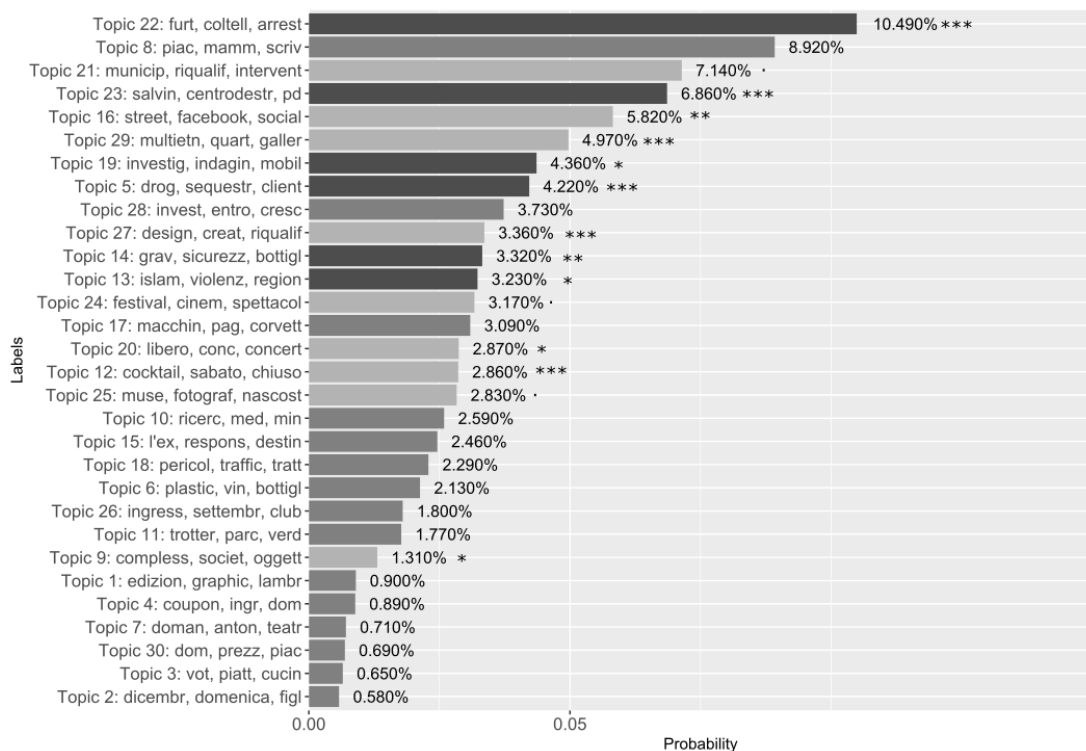
Figure 1: Main topics emerging from the STM analysis. The percentage represents the proportion of the topic in relation to the total corpus. Dark grey topics are significantly correlated with via Padova, light grey topics with NoLo, while middle grey topics have no significant correlation. The level confidence intervals are ***= 0.001, **= 0.01, *= 0.05, .= 0.1

What is particularly significant is that the very same urban actors or phenomena can become, once embedded in the two different media regimes of visibility, invested by radically opposed forms of supra-visibility and invisibility, in line with what Brighenti (2007) observed. Migrants become supra-visible as a menace to the security of 'respectable citizens' in the via Padova regime but are a source of the multi-ethnic attractivity of the neighbourhood in the NoLo one. Urban decay becomes either supra-visible to support the denounce of the political laxness of the left toward crime or to exalt the ongoing redevelopment interventions. Graffitis become either a symbol of the urban decay of the area or a fundamental component of the vibrant artistic atmosphere of the revitalising neighbourhood. Still, in both cases the same actors and phenomena can also be made invisible: migrants in both regimes remain largely subalterns without voices, to be represented and strategically used by the different regimes. The same can be argued for most graffiti makers.

Notably, via Padova territory was not just the object of a violent media campaign. Long before NoLo was coined, in via Padova communities of activists started to engage in a fierce conflict against the negative representation of the area, with a counter-narrative

exalting its multiculturality and vitality. They operate mainly through '*via Padova Viva*' (in English 'Street Padova alive'), an association founded in 2017 (but existing from before) which also opened its own Social District, attempting to replicate the NoLo one. More recently, connected to it a new project called '*Abitare in via Padova*' ('living in via Padova') has been born, with the declared intent to fight the steady rise of the renting and purchasing prices in the area.

The agenda of 'via Padova Viva' and of NoLo Social District communities are similar but also competitive: they both aim to enhance the reputation and the living standards of the two (partially overlapping) areas, but they use two different vocabularies and registers. via Padova Viva has not produced a regime as visible as the NoLo one, arguably also because they decided to not rely on a place brand, aligning with more classic associationism and community organising practices. When via Padova territory, especially the first half of it, started to be tightly associated with NoLo, many activists involved in its defence worried about its symbolic and toponymic appropriation. Participating in local meetings, I heard multiple concerns over 'maintaining via Padova united' or denouncing that 'NoLo is contending the first part of via Padova, if we don't do anything it will break away'. Interviewed, a member of via Padova Viva explained that their concern was primarily that NoLo could strip the first part of via Padova bringing to the redevelopment of that fraction and leaving behind all the rest of the long street, while their agenda was to redevelop via Padova in its entirety and maintaining its historical and peculiar identity. There was also a shared concern that the regime of visibility of NoLo was strategically instrumentalising the general multicultural identity of the area. As one retailer part of the via Padova community summarised:

If it hadn't been for via Padova, no one would have talked about NoLo, no article would have been published saying 'the peripheral Bronx is reborn thanks to young creative people'. Objectively, Piazza Morbegno and via Venini were average Milanese roads, without a strong identity; this helped to establish the new identity. (Sabrina)

NoLo symbolic expansion into via Padova historic territory brought to the establishment of porous zones, where different mainstream regimes stratified and contaminated each other (Brighenti, 2010). Among some inhabitants, the recognition of this phenomenon brought to the coinage of an auto-ironic distinction between the west area of NoLo as 'Malibù' (i.e., the most upscaled part), and the east part of NoLo, the one

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coinciding with via Padova, as 'DDR' (i.e. the poorer one). The two mocking labels highlighted how despite the place brand being applied uniformly on the territory, NoLo was way more visible on the western side, while on the eastern one, the visibility of via Padova – in both negative or positive symbolic meanings – was at least as strong.

Discussing media, regimes of visibility, and the right to the brand

The analysis of regimes of visibility development and interactions with the urban space and other social actors allows to appreciate their complexity. Indeed, the two regimes of visibility of NoLo and of via Padova interact between them and with other social actors in different ways according to the dimension under exam. From a strictly political and symbolic point of view, NoLo developed as a counter-hegemonic regime of visibility opposite to the already hegemonic via Padova one: the latter is functional to right-wing xenophobic propaganda in favour of the militarisation and securitisation of the city; the first instead promotes inclusivity, vitality, and multiculturalism, in line with cosmopolitan and liberal sentiments. However, from a political economy viewpoint, via Padova regime was functional to the rise of NoLo as hegemonic: the latter made strategic use of the first blighted image and strong identity to build its narrative and promote the revitalisation process.

The inclusion of all the involved actors' viewpoints and interests adds critical understanding to the picture. Media fuelled both regimes of visibility to hegemony to capitalise on the virality of the news pieces related to them. External actors with commercial interests, from the organisers of big events to estate agents, once the regime started had all the interests to push NoLo counter-hegemonic regime to replace via Padova's one, to capitalise on the potential gentrification of the area. *Nolers* were the first to push NoLo as a counter-hegemonic regime of visibility against via Padova, to gain recognition and a sense of belonging in the area in addition to promoting it positively. They lamented media power in diverting the symbolic meanings of the regime of visibility in different directions, creating their own media and events to try to gain as much control of it as possible. At the same time, they largely benefitted from the decisive contribution brought by the media to impose NoLo as a successful regime of visibility, that was their goal too. Considering the high proficiency possessed by many key NoLo community members in the field of marketing and communication, despite their lamentations, the triggering of media coverage and the subsequent positive and stereotyped representations of the area were someway implicit consequences of the initial choice to use a symbolically

highly evocative place brand. Overall, for them, the regime of visibility presented itself with a trade-off: guarantee the hegemonic status of NoLo, in exchange for losing predominant control over its representation and visibility. It may also offer them a moral justification. Similarly to what Ocejo's (2021) ethnography of newcomers in NewBurgh concluded, *Nolers* are 'conditional gentrifiers' displaying deep concerns for the impact of the area's revitalisation on existing inhabitants – especially migrants – and seek to prevent harm to them, by keeping control on the 'positive gentrification' development of the area. As media operate out of their control, *Nolers* can blame them for the negative externalities of the place branding process without damaging the righteousness of their actions.

Lastly, community members of via Padova viva are intent on promoting an autonomous counter-hegemonic positive visibility regime against the via Padova negative mainstream one. For them, NoLo regime represented a double-faced phenomenon. On one side, they recognised the resonance of the symbolic values promoted by NoLo with theirs – such as inclusion, multiculturality, openness, vitality, revitalisation, etc – and consequently the potential aid it could bring against the common symbolic opposite composed by the via Padova one. On the other side, faced with the spectacular rise of the place brand, they saw it as a menace to their long years of work to favour a distinctive counter-hegemonic image of via Padova and to the existence of via Padova territory itself.

The regime of visibility of NoLo became hegemonic over the territory it carved out because it acquired, still following Gramscian vocabulary, a *common-sense* status in it. It had a clear performative effect: as it became growingly hegemonic, media representations of the area slowly imposed themselves in the actual processes taking place. The more media described it as the new creative hub full of art galleries and hipster bars, the more such kind of retail spaces opened. As such, it passed from being a tool of recognition for the new inhabitants to being a tool of control as well, forcing all inhabitants of 'NoLo' under its symbolic values, to be subjected to its zones of supra-visibility and invisibility, and the risks of commercialisation related to the place brand. Notably, the territorial boundaries proved to be fluid, with a tendency of them to expand at convenience beyond the initial ones settled by the NoLo Social District.

Despite the bottom-up nature of NoLo place branding development, devoid at its birth of corporate interests or of clear growth coalitions, once the media identified NoLo as a lucrative earning prospect thanks to its coolness and controversial status, they started to

cover it with content exaggerating all the aspects functional to its virality, creating a stereotyped representation with performative effects and paving the way to external speculative interests. This highlights the need to consider brands not as neutral identity labels with some symbolic connotation but as possessors of intrinsic capitalist logic, functional to commodification and financialization practices (Arvidsson, 2006). Thus, the potential for residents to establish a 'right to the brand' for greater equality and fairness is questionable, due to the inherent properties of brands, which leave them open to exploitation by external actors, regardless of who originated the brand: to play with place brands means to play with fire. For urban planners, institutions, and branding managers this confirms the importance to dismiss the involvement of inhabitants as protagonists in place branding processes as an easy antidote to the risks of commodification, politicisation, and gentrification of urban space (Braun et al., 2013). For community organisers, this means that any citizen-led attempt to regain control over the symbolic identity of an urban territory through a brand can only succeed by deeply de-structuring and re-structuring the very notion of what a brand is and how it works, in ways that are entirely to be explored and experimented.

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