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The bottom-up place branding of a neighbourhood: analysing a case of selective empowerment

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Abstract

This article analyses the entanglement of social impacts of bottom-up urban branding processes on local hyper-diverse communities, through an ethnography of a neighbourhood of Milan recently named by a group of residents as “NoLo”. Indeed, existing literature has broadly investigated urban rebranding as a tool used by policymakers to foster social change and economic capital, imposing top-down transformations. Nevertheless, a gap in the bottom-up place rebranding processes exists. We inspect it through the aforementioned case study and by combining place branding literature, the loss of place identity and theories on empowerment. Empirically, we analyse the socio-economic processes and the actors that enabled the rebranding, discussing the positive externalities and the criticalities in terms of marginalization of weaker social groups and cultural hegemony. As for the theory, we contribute to the literature arguing that a bottom-up process is not enough to avoid a loss of place identity, as it can lead to selective empowerment.

Keywords: urban branding, bottom-up, loss of place identity, social exclusion, selective empowerment

Introduction

In the last decades, neighbourhoods and peripheral areas of metropolitan cities all over the world have often been reshaped through the uncritical adoption of top-down design ideas by real estate agents and policy makers, which only served to homogenise places and deny authenticity (Hall, 2008). As taught by political agendas, city branding is a strategic tool of beautification, i.e. presenting only the positive aspects of a place: it selectively frames the metropolis and draws people's attention to positive images of the urban milieu, ignoring aspects or social groups which are not considered attractive or interesting by the branding authorities. As it happens with the appropriation of traditions, often roped into society branding while more negative aspects of the past are ignored (Dinnie, 2010), history is turned into mere storytelling. The urban landscape is inevitably shaped by private interests mediated by the market, resulting in space domestication processes such as gentrification (Sacco et al., 2018). In this context, top-down practices are essentially implemented through hegemonic tools, such as the physical and social grammar of the urban space, that define the right to the city and oppose bottom-up practices of re-appropriation of spaces and of democratic decision-making power by local communities. Critical literature on place branding has presented bottom-up interventions as a positive alternative that leaves space to include and empower local communities. However, the positive outcomes of bottom-up place branding are taken for granted: the literature focuses on the successful results, overlooking the possible negative externalities in the neighbourhood's entirety.

This article provides a first contribution to fill this analytical gap through an ethnographic research conducted in a neighbourhood of Milan that has been recently named as "NoLo". The popularity of this new toponym is the outcome of a successful case of place branding, spontaneously started and managed directly by local citizens and connected to a wider project of urban renewal and re-functionalization of the whole city (Faravelli & Clerici, 2012). These peculiar features make NoLo a very rare and privileged standpoint to analyse the decisive factors and the outcomes of "pure" bottom-up place branding processes, led by members of local communities without the supervision or the coordination of real estate developers or public institutions. Accordingly, the focus of the analysis will be twofold. On one side, describing the factors and the mechanisms that allowed a process of place branding to begin and be successful to the point of reaching official recognition entirely from below. On the other side, the focus will also be on checking the claim about the positivity of bottom-up processes of place branding for local communities, in order to obtain a more fine-grained picture of the benefits and limits of such processes, focusing in particular on who takes advantage of the positive outcomes and who remains excluded or, even worse, suffers from any negative outcomes and dangers.

The structure of the article will be as follows. First, we will review the literature about place branding, the relationship between individuals and toponyms, the gentrification of branded neighbourhoods and

processes of engagement and empowerment. Then, after a methodological section, we will illustrate the empirical results of the research and discuss them in three sections. In the first section, we will introduce the neighbourhood of NoLo, describing its context and past and analysing the observable early symptoms of a gentrification process. In the second section, we will look at the process of bottom-up place branding that took place, enumerating the actors and factors that made it possible and schematising them into a model. In the third section, on the basis of micro-interviews with the residents we inspect how citizens, in particular the ones pertaining to the categories less directly involved in the place branding process, consider and evaluate the transformation that is happening, how much they feel part of 'NoLo' or excluded from it. Finally, in the conclusion we summarise the results and the empirical as well as the theoretical contributions brought to the literature.

City branding, urban transformation, and the loss of place identity theory

From the beginning of 2015 to the early 2019 we observed the peripheral district we analyse in the present work: the NoLo district. It showed some threatening early symptoms of gentrification, and the phenomenon has been compounded by place branding, which turned the area from a mere unknown intertwining of derelict properties and streets into the most appealing district for creatives and young venturers. This context-specific ongoing process is causing different reactions from city actors and community residents in terms of economic and cultural access and identity.

NoLo is an acronym that stands for "North of Loreto", where Loreto is the renowned historical square in Milan. Its origin, as we will explain afterwards, is an explicit imitation of the "cool names" of recently re-named neighbourhoods in New York, and presumably the first application of this American trend in an Italian context.

This recent phenomenon of re-reading and re-functionalization is accompanied by symptoms of gentrification, but it has no clear-cut direct causality to physical displacement, due to the specific real estate market conditions of the city of Milan and Italy itself. Indeed, gentrification is not just a housing issue (Semi, 2015): new retail investors actively change the social class and ethnic character of the neighbourhood, distressing community identity (Zukin, 2009).

We would like to inspect this process of neighbourhoods' re-naming by approaching it not only as a matter of geographic toponyms but as part of the "symbolic ecologies" (Hunter 1987): toponyms also became commodities with an important economic function, beyond their geographical and political role (Light and Young 2015). New, cool labels are applied to neighbourhoods with the aim of giving them a fresh, appealing, and trendy identity. They can thus be defined and analysed as brands, i.e. as tools to transform everyday life into economic value (Arvidsson 2006). In this context, renaming a place can be considered a branding process of the symbolic ecology of the neighbourhood.

Urban policy-makers increasingly exploit urban rebranding as a popular marketing instrument to create a positive perceptions of specific areas, whereby the brand is rooted in a common view on the desired

direction of development and closely connected to the existing reality (Eshuis & Edelbons, 2009). Place branding is considered mainly a planning instrument to steer urban regeneration, foster social change and attract economic capital (Trueman et al., 2008) when the many different identities of the neighbourhood are strongly connected and solid enough to resist the pressure of top-down identity changes. In difficult, peripheral contexts, local public city-makers but also local elites increasingly seek to promote urban branding to overcome one area's bad reputation. Culture is often used as an instrument of creative urban redefinition, and as a way to generate narratives countering the perception of planetary standardisation, creating authenticity and developing global competitiveness (Ulldemolins, 2014).

Examples of local branding in academic literature usually show a common pattern, with a new cool brand name introduced and promoted from above by real estate agencies, institutions or corporations (Bennet and Savani 2003; Kearns and Lewis 2018) to capitalize on the new attractiveness of the neighbourhood. Being in the position to impose a new name can thus be considered a form of discursive power, whose success depends on the ability of the proponents to assemble a recognised toponym (Wideman and Masuda 2017).

Unsurprisingly, then, actors holding significant powers, like real estate agencies or corporations, are often the decisive force behind urban branding processes. However, the role of the citizens should not be overlooked: for a new toponym to become rooted, it needs to be used by groups of inhabitants in everyday life (Taylor, Gottredson, and Brower 1984), taking into account also that different groups name the same neighbourhood differently (Lee, Oropesa, and Kanan 1994). Furthermore, citizens are of course not just passive targets influenced by other actors, but also active cultural and economic agents that can shape local brands (Keatinge and Martin 2016). Coherently with these assumptions, in recent years the neglect of local communities has been denounced by critical studies (Casais and Monteiro, 2019; Kavaratzis et al., 2017) and the active participation of inhabitants has been stressed as a fundamental element by a growing body of research (Hudson et al., 2017; Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015; Zenker and Erfgen, 2014). The defining features of this 'participatory' or 'inclusive' approach to place branding are the will to privilege the interests of local inhabitants (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015), the creation of a shared vision and the implementation of structures to favour active participation (Zenker and Erfgen, 2014). In one notable piece of work, the authors even developed a framework to allow planners to activate a 'bottom-up' place branding process, in which community stakeholders are pivotal actors in the definition of the place's brand (Hudson et. al, 2017). This growing body of research argues that giving the inhabitants a protagonist role will produce a stronger brand and enhance the positive externalities on the territory.

However, we detected two gaps. First, this body of research seems to take for granted the capability of participatory place branding processes to empower local communities, with a lack of analyses about the effective strengths and limits of such processes. Secondly, they all represent correctives or alternative frameworks to place branding processes actually started and directed by real estate agencies or public

institutions. They do not provide models for truly bottom-up processes, spontaneously originated, and developed by residents.

Indeed, cases of spontaneous bottom-up place branding seem very rare. A research in 2004 analysing 81 cases of neighbourhood rebranding (mainly but not exclusively in the U.S.) showed a clear predominance of real estate agents as promoters and protagonists of the process (Reitman, 2004). The plethora of 'cool acronyms' characterising the renaming of New York districts (Buckley, 2011), explicit reference point for the minds behind NoLo, followed the same tendency. Real estate agents are responsible for the popularity of brands such as SoHo, NoLiTa, TriBeCa and many others, coining them to raise the value of houses for sale (Etherington, 2017). Even when the history of the district (being it a founding myth or not) attributes the coinage to local artists, as in the case of DUMBO, the growth and success of the new toponym to a large extent came from the efforts of some real estate developer (Hackworth 2002) that bought 2 million square feet in the area (Melby, 2014).

Thus, to empirically analyse cases of bottom-up spontaneous place branding it is necessary to refer to other strains of literature, dealing with place identity, indirect forms of displacement and processes of empowerment. Existing literature has highlighted how important it is not to take one group of inhabitants as representative of the whole local population, as different groups can have strong and divergent opinions about the name of the neighbourhood, its identity and boundaries, consequently expressing divergent agencies (Coulton, Chan and Mikelbank 2011) even though they might live in close proximity. So, in this article, the attention will be drawn not only to the relation between the leading group of inhabitants promoting NoLo and the big players, but also between the leading group and other groups living in the same neighbourhood, primarily elderly inhabitants. Indeed, studying branding (or rebranding) processes also means dealing with the struggle for economic and cultural capital in a urban space between different actors (Madden 2017): the winners gain "membership" to the newly branded urban space and benefit from their legitimation, the losers are forcibly disenfranchised from the new brand and are gradually marginalized (Langhorst 2015). The group of the excluded minority, then, experiences a sense of loss of place, even without experiencing a physical displacement, due to the branding process generating transformations in shops and meeting places, as well as in the nature of local social structures and interventions (Shaw and Hagemans, 2015).

Dealing with an indirect form of displacement means understanding gentrification and displacement as more than merely economic processes, and transcending the oppositional thinking produced by the dualism between economic analysis and cultural analysis - a postmodernist interpretation in which the accumulation of knowledge, and not economic power, is at the heart of social structures (Hassan, 1985). Authors such as Rose (1984), Jager (1986), Smith (1987), Caulfield (1989), Hamnett (1991; 1992), and Smith (1991; 1992) have attempted to take this path.

While these recent studies, and others (Vigdor et al., 2002; Freeman, 2005; Freeman and Braconi, 2004; and Hamnett, 2003), are related insofar as they question the extent of displacement in gentrifying neighbourhoods, they are also united by a particular understanding of displacement, constructed as a

spatialised migratory process within the urban space. Many gentrification studies have recognised that gentrifiers change neighbourhood governance and place identity (Butler and Robson, 2003; Freeman and Braconi, 2004; Mele, 2000; Slater, 2002; Zukin, 1989). The first conceptualisation of a form of indirect displacement comes from Peter Marcuse (1985; 1986). With the exclusionary displacement theory and the displacement pressure theory, he maintains that indirect displacement is not only related to changes in the housing market, but also to the economic and cultural externalities that a gentrifying reinvestment of capital can generate. Following Slater (2006) and Marcuse (1985), Davidson (2008; 2009) helps renew the debate on gentrification by arguing that the absence of relocation is not sufficient evidence for the absence of displacement. In Davidson's frame, displacement starts from a relational and socially constructed definition of place, rather than relying on the simple equation of place = location. If a place changes, one can experience feelings of displacement.

In 2015, Shaw and Hagemans wrote an article along the same lines, in which they enrich the discussion by showing that when shops, meeting places, local social structures, and governments are changed by the wave of gentrification in rebranded districts the result is a sense of loss of place identity even without physical displacement; rebranding's positive effects are also contested by many other studies (Arthurson 2004, 2012; Randolph and Wood, 2004; Uitermark et al. 2007; Lees 2008, Musterd et al. 2011; and Manley et al. 2012). Shaw and Hagemans argue that the impact of neighbourhood resource and community displacement (Davidson, 2008) can be similar to that of physical displacement in economic, social and human terms, causing first and foremost a sense of loss of place identity. This, in turn, can evoke a sense of loss of familiar surroundings, as well as feelings of grief, loss of stability and loss of control in the local community, who then feels disoriented. The sense of community is threatened when the nature of familiar elements is twisted by undergoing a transition in terms of access and domain. As Shaw and Hagemans state, "all places change, of course. The key is the scale of change and the availability of alternatives". Indeed, affordability, cultural accessibility, and local rituals change at a pace that can be described as problematic when external forces focus on a place as a new target for new, different groups that replace the original historical authenticity of the place and its everyday identity. Newcomers, through re-naming and reorientation of the target, also turn places into spaces symbolically and economically appropriate for the interests of a different group of people, and as a consequence places become unfamiliar for the local communities to the point that they can no longer associate with them (Davidson, 2008). This loss of place identity can be as distressing as physical relocation, therefore producing a sense of loss of power, and exacerbating social isolation (Shaw & Hagemans, 2015).

As we just observed, there is a gap in literature about a bottom-up place branding process resulting in gentrification and loss of place identity. An exploratory analysis of the NoLo's case study could offer a first contribution to fill this gap. Currently, NoLo is a toponym not only born but also publicly recognised mainly thanks to the work of a group of local citizens, organized through a mix of digital and physical networks. As we will argue in our results, the media played an increasingly important role in influencing the uneven development and the early stages of gentrification of the NoLo

neighbourhood. Yet what distinguishes NoLo from other cases is the leading role played by the group of inhabitants in the branding process, making it a potential case of the bottom-up branding process.

Methods

This article is the result of two ethnographic researches conducted by the authors in the neighbourhood of NoLo, mostly separately, during two and a half years of fieldwork between November 2015 and May 2018.

The *corpus* of empirical material collected during the ethnography consists of participant observation led by the authors during events of various kinds in the neighbourhood, at bars or cafés and in public spaces. Twenty-one in-depth interviews were carried out, of which 14 with owners of recently opened bars and restaurants in the area, 3 interviews with distinctive members of NoLo community, 1 interview with a member of a local association and 3 interviews with journalists that wrote articles on NoLo. Lastly, 64 micro-interviews were carried out during participant observation with local inhabitants and occasionally through social media with the same target.

The choice of the people being interviewed during the ethnographic research was taken following a purposive homogeneous strategy (Etikan, 2016), selecting the ones more closely related to and relevant for the development of NoLo as territorial branding.

The micro-interviews were conducted following a questionnaire. Questions were related to the affordability and the frequency with which residents frequent new shops, restaurants, public spaces, galleries¹ and the events proposed by NoLo Social District's Facebook group and its community. Other questions concerned the extent to which they feel aware of and involved in the change, and the perception and evaluation of its impact on their lives in the neighbourhood in terms of economic opportunities, social enhancement and cultural belonging (Ferilli et al., 2017).

Following the standards in ethnographic research, all the names have been anonymised for privacy. All the people interviewed in depth were Italians, apart from one foreign bar owner, ranging from young to old but with a majority of middle-aged people. Micro-interviews enabled us to include in the analysis, albeit partially, the foreign population of the neighbourhood: out of the 64 people involved, 24 were foreigners and 40 Italians. Both new and old inhabitants are represented and are respectively 22 and 42. During our ethnographic research, we followed the "Extended Case Method" principles by Burawoy (1998): we started to conduct our analysis with the lens of two theoretical frameworks, the loss of place identity theory and the theories regarding local branding, and we progressed through our ethnography looking to enrich the aforementioned theories with our results.

¹ This research led to different outputs, to read more about art and public space: Tartari M., Pedrini S., Sacco P.L. (2020) Urban 'beautification' and its discontents: The erosion of urban commons in NoLo, Milan, Humanities Department, IULM University

NoLo, a peripheral area on the path towards gentrification

Milan is the most important Italian global hub, fully integrated into the globalization processes and characterized by a high level of social inequalities and disparities in income per capita, reflected into an antagonism between new rich social groups and new servile strata, in which the foreign population plays an important role (Fregolent & Vettoreto, 2017), and so does the distinction between the periphery and the centre (Bondue, 2000). In Milan, the process of urban renewal was driven by the local government, who forced the long-term yet less well-off entrepreneurs and lower-class residents out of the city centre (Manzo, 2006) in an elitist reconfiguration of the social fabric that aimed at concentrating there the economic and intellectual capital. The neighbourhood in question was informally assigned to indigent groups. When, in the 1970s and 1980s, the first waves of non-European immigrants came, the area around via Padova offered cheap, low quality housing solutions, and for Milanese citizens, no potential redemption of the area could ever be imagined. In fact, Italian middle and lower-middle class residents, those who hold purchasing power, preferred to move to towns in the countryside served by the subway, hoping for a better quality of life. Only the poorest remained. Therefore, for the last few decades, the neighbourhood has always been identified by the media, politicians, and citizens as a low-class area of conflict between various ethnic groups, a place of public disorder and difficult integration (Arrigoni, 2010). Since the 1990s, the neighbourhood has dramatically suffered a kind of political exploitation through massive negative storytelling about insecurity put in place by policymakers.

In the late 2000s, the social, economical, and political scenery of the neighbourhood around via Padova showed signs of coexistence of Italian and foreign families², shops and services. The area's difficult situation in terms of liveability and social cohesion was due to a high level of petty crime and deprivation (Bernasconi, Ciniselli, 2013; Rezza, Mastrella, 2016). Some of the Italian residents used to point their finger at foreign communities, fuelled by a right-wing ideology of intolerance spread by influential politicians since the mid-1990s (Spektorowski, 2003).

The process we observed can be considered a case of first-wave sporadic gentrification (Hackworth & Smith, 2001) in disinvested inner-city districts, characterized by investments in business retail, not fully state-led but rather private-led, with a growing presence of the middle-class in nature leisure activities such as pubs, restaurants, art galleries and mundane events. In light of this pattern, we identified a number of emerging elements that were numerically marginal but symbolically and economically dominant (Bourdieu, 1979), defining the socio-spatial semiotics (Gottdiener et al., 2014) of the area. At the end of 2014, the multi-ethnic district between Viale Brianza and via Padova in Milan has been facing an urban renewal, led by popular and political will (Citroni & Coppola, 2020) to overcome its bad reputation.

² In 2016, as reported by official Milan City Council data, the total number of residents in NoLo was 79,796, of which 33% (27,105 residents) foreigners (as compared to a 13.9% share in the whole city).

The district branding operation with the name NoLo first impacted the rental market sector. The conditions of the Italian real estate market, with its high percentage of homeowners, partly stem from the phenomenon of direct displacement. But the specific inner-city housing context of NoLo has made a district re-functionalization possible through the growing trend of rentals targeted at tourists and students. Already in 2017 *AirBnB* ads within the district had grown to about 150, describing NoLo as “buzzing with new shops and restaurants” and “transforming at a rapid rate”. As Davidson (2008) observes, devalued inner-urban residential areas attract speculators as soon as they are invested by socio-cultural processes, and this ‘smells like gentrification’ (Davidson, 2008).

The second symptom we took into account was commercialisation, which gives clues on gentrification as a mirror of the coexistence of a new social group and old inhabitants within the latter’s own geographic baselines (Ley, 1996, Bovone, 1999, Bridge and Dowling, 2001, Lehman -Frisch, 2002; Gastaldi, 2003; Zukin et al., 2009). Commercial activities are related to gentrification through recurring dynamics set off by pioneers, who are able to intercept emerging international trends and open new businesses to attract new targets and reshape the city map (van Criekingen, 1997; van Criekingen e Fleury, 2006). Since 2015, many new stores and shops, clubs and restaurants in NoLo have been instrumental in promoting a different set of values and habits through a specific aesthetic grammar, conveying a wish for international homologation to the Western urban experience (Romero, 2018). The pattern is common and well recognised, with a dominant culture dressing up like a subculture (Henke, 2013; Schiermer, 2014; Michael, 2015; Maly & Varis, 2016) in reference to the US-American “hipster culture”, risking to lose touch with the context’s reality and identity.

Moreover, NoLo’s place branding was accompanied and warmly supported by a wave of artists, creatives, architects, and new art galleries. This emerging pattern clearly recalls the interaction, both conflictual and cooperative, between urban dwellers and street artists, who create private and commercialised public spaces or offer them back as a collective good hoping that a sense of belonging and dialogue will turn them into a meaningful place again (Visconti et al., 2010). The process starts with artists and artistic businesses moving to a neglected neighbourhood and setting the stage for gentrification by renovating and decorating its landscape, thereby attracting higher income groups with spaces for cultural consumption (Zukin, 1982; Ley, 1996; Lloyd, 2002; Cameron & Coaffe, 2005; Pratt, 2009).

The obsessive need to change the name of the neighbourhood, the growing number of new residents, and the emergence of a specific kind of consumption and aestheticisation are just cultural markers of a deeper process (Semi, 2015). Typically, marketing and place branding attempt to orchestrate cultural and aesthetic capital to promote a city or area. The primary aim is achieving economic benefits, like a greater number of visitor and more investment (McCarty, 2006). But who benefits from this process? An important part of the revitalisation of neighbourhoods and urban space is the ongoing struggle to define the meaning of a city and for whom it exists (Fraser, 2004); the introduction of new semantics,

new consumption practices, and new cultural behaviours is the basis for identity changing and the path that might make a place unfamiliar if no negotiation is made with its current identity.

The birth of a bottom-up place branding

“NoLo”’s birth dates back to 2013 and stems from an idea of three creative professionals, living in the neighbourhood but working abroad at the time, during a trip to New York. They discussed how they could rename their neighbourhood in order to reverse the negative storytelling it was surrounded with. They took inspiration from some acronyms used in big Western cities like London and New York to rebrand and revitalise rundown districts or anonymous suburbs, such as Soho or NoLiTa, and came up with the brand-new toponym of “NoLo”. One of them, interviewed by a national Italian newspaper, affirmed ex-post: “Generally speaking it turned out to be a zero-cost operation, realised with word of mouth - we began using this name, and that started to circulate” (Aquaro 2018).

In 2015 the name started spreading effectively. At that time, another young creative professional, a new resident of the neighbourhood, created a Social Street (Morelli, 2019) for the residents naming it “NoLo Social District”, influenced by the upcoming trend and aggregating two previously founded virtual Social Streets³.

Two combined elements can explain how NoLo gained support so rapidly and, after two years of low perfusion, was selected with flying colours as the preferred name for the Social Street of the neighbourhood.

Firstly, “NoLo”’s core area borders the tracks of the Central Station, Loreto Square, and the so-called “Northern barrier”, and it is surrounded by historic neighbourhoods (“Gioia”, “Turro”, “Loreto”, “Casoretto”), but has no name itself. Indeed, the names of the two other Social Streets were “Via Padova” and “Pasteur”. Via Padova is a one-mile-long street tangent to the zone, with an unpleasant reputation of being the most dangerous street of Milan, and a peripheral vocation. Deposits, garages, cargo terminals on trucks, petrol and fuel stations, car dealerships, factories, as well as a significant presence of sub-proletarians and immigrants from southern Italy stuck in an overcrowded ghetto: all these factors gave the area its particular connotation and set it apart from all the other working-class districts of Milan’s periphery. Pasteur, instead, is the name of the local tube station, named after a small street, which never corresponded to any recognised identity. The words of one of the founders of Social Street explain the general approach to the local branding:

When I heard the name, I thought, ‘Now, that’s a cool name!’. I found it very nice and useful, because I bought a house in this area and I really struggled to communicate where I lived,

³ Social streets are a phenomenon born in Bologna, Italy in 2014. They are Facebook groups closed to the inhabitants of a street or a local area. The fundamental goal is to foster socialisation between neighbours. Their manifesto can be found at <http://www.socialstreet.it/wp/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Social-street-inglese.pdf> (last consulted on 09/21/2020)

people did not understand. So, I would simply say the name of my street and they answered that they did not know it...then I would say “Viale Monza” and they would answer “Well but Viale Monza is really long”. In that moment I realised that there was a void...there was no name for my place. So when I heard NoLo, I thought ‘that’s the perfect name!’” (Dado)

While the void partly helped set the frame for the success of the new brand, a second element was nevertheless necessary: a part of the local population needed to identify itself with it as a banner of their recent settling in. Indeed, a significant group of young, Italian, middle-class inhabitants had recently moved into the area. This can be explained by a multiplicity of combined factors. On a structural level, in the last few years the city of Milan has experienced subsequent gentrification waves in central and semi-peripheral areas (Diappi and Bolchi, 2006), making rents unbearable for the highly precarious middle-class working in the creative industry (Gill and Pratt, 2008). These waves leave them with the not-so-pleasant perspective of moving to the most peripheral neighbourhoods or in the hinterland, often far from or badly connected to their workplaces, located near the city centre. Thus, in the last decade the creative class struggled to find interstices in the gentrified city, and consequently to find a bearable balance between rents, quality of life and prestige. The area of NoLo is a perfect candidate for balancing these factors. Its working-class origin, the high presence of migrants and the bad reputation associated with Via Padova helped to keep the rents affordable. At the same time, the area is perfectly served by public transports (the two main metropolitan lines of the city pass through it and the central station of Milan is just a few minutes away) allowing easy commuting wherever needed.

This newly established and quite homogeneous group of Italian creative class workers of middle-class origins made up the cultural milieu (Hall & Jefferson, 2006) that started to use the name NoLo. This social group can definitely be considered the humus needed by the brand to grow and fill a void. Thus, by the end of 2015, the Facebook group NoLo Social District became active, but still NoLo was far from being considered a successful place renaming.

Three key events started between the end of 2015 and the beginning of 2016 that fostered the branding process of the neighbourhood: the development of an online and offline community that grew around the Social District; the opening of many different retail businesses and shops, mainly pubs; a growing media coverage. We can consider these phenomena the engine, the backbone and the trigger that helped the bottom-up branding to find breeding ground.

The group “NoLo Social District” can be defined as the perennial engine of the process because it gave the inhabitants a digital public sphere where to meet, discuss and tie bonds as “inhabitants of NoLo”. As in the words of an already established resident who now is a key member of the NoLo community: “for many of us the neighbourhood is reborn. Not only the area is coming back to life and is alive again in the public eye, but above all human relations are reborn, and this is fantastic” (Lia).

Social streets are usually digital, but this rebirth of human relations happened mainly in the physical space: the core ability of this engine has been to shift from a digital framework, populated by thousands

of inhabitants, to a smaller but tighter community of *de visu* bonds. This process started from “neighbourhood breakfasts” regularly organised for the members of the group and followed with the creation of sub-groups (there were 10 by the beginning of 2019) and independent projects still related to the district, like Radio NoLo (a web radio), SanNoLo (a music festival for inhabitants), NoLo Fringe Festival (a Fringe theatrical festival), BienNoLo (a contemporary art exhibition). These bonds do not limit themselves to mere sociability but also become the foundation for the development of communities of purpose. Analysing the inhabitants of NoLo, Citroni and Coppola (2020) coined the concept of “leisure activism”, stressing how this thick network of social events supports a subtle political agenda too, capable of influencing policymakers.

In the same period new “cool pubs” opened, willing to satisfy the taste of the newcomers: these places can be considered the physical infrastructure of the process, the urban counterpart of the Social District. They served a double function: as places of daily, casual after-work meetings for newcomers, but also as a stage for public events of the district, where projects are presented. The existing pubs already located in the area probably lacked the cultural resonance and did not match the taste and social desires of the newly established cultural milieu. So, “cool pubs” managed to establish a “logistics of alcoholic flows” (Gerosa, 2019) whereby new inhabitants did not need to scatter around the nightlife of other neighbourhoods anymore, but had their own new, culturally resonant scene.

Lastly, the role of the media can be considered a trigger for the renaming process. Through their articles, they allowed the majority of the inhabitants to hear the “NoLo” acronym and discover the Social District for the first time. The NoLo community developed a controversial relationship with the media, perceived as the medium that allowed the process of branding but, at the same time, as vectors of a distorted narrative.

As one founder of the Social District told us:

“NoLo is not a brand, nor a new phenomenon of hipster artists, it has been a media narrative to characterise it as such. [...] The media nevertheless gave the kick-off or at least a great push to the process, this is a bit disturbing because it was as if the process needed external recognition.” (Dado).

These three factors taken together, however, would not have been sufficient: in order to be used, the brand itself must possess enough symbolic and semiotic power to echo the cultural milieu. Using the words of one of its coiners:

“I saw there were all these interesting people moving here, but they were embarrassed to tell people where they lived. So I said we must find a name to make these people proud. [...] I like to say that I discovered NoLo, I did not invent it, because I simply looked at what was happening and at the new incomers.” (Galli)

In order to critically understand the dynamic process that this local branding provoked, it is useful to point out that the name NoLo has been created by creative and communication professionals during their free time. Their choice implies the promotion of a brand imaginary connected to a specific future vision of the area, realised by ascribing of a set of attributes and values to products, services and spaces, and providing opportunities for disassociating the neighbourhood from past failures or social problems (Lewis, 2000; Bennet & Savani, 2003). In this way, NoLo explicitly recalls the names of those New York cutting-edge neighbourhoods such as SoHo, TriBeCa or NoLiTa with the manifest intention of giving the neighbourhood a positive connotation, as opposed to the previous identity of peripheral multi-ethnic area. Moreover, this specific kind of branding is strongly connected to the artistic and creative characterisation of the cases on which it is modelled, already considered by literature as textbooks of art-led rezoned areas. Therefore, the name NoLo evokes a powerful suggestion, staging itself as the upcoming artistic creative district of Milan. The new inhabitants can proudly identify themselves with it when they perceive a strong link between their presence and NoLo's projected image.

The NoLo brand performed particularly well in this regard, resulting in a good example of self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton 1948): the more people and media referred to it as the new trendy creative neighbourhood of Milan, influenced by its symbolic charge, the more it attracted members pertaining to creative professions, businesses related to these sectors and artistic events. The symbolic and cultural debt to the American imaginary is confirmed by the fact that NoLo, in its expanded form, was conceived by its inventors in Italian, as Nord Loreto. However, in the two years between its creation and its retention, what came out of the filter of daily conversations was the English form "North of Loreto", and it remained like that for everyone from then on.

The bottom-up branding engagement: a selective form of empowerment

In the previous section, we analysed how the coexistence of many social and economic factors led to the renaming and the substantial changing of the district on behalf of a group of people gathered in a specific cultural milieu, who benefit from the transition more than other groups of residents. Even though this transition has a strong bottom-up vocation and none of the promoters has ever intentionally worked in an exclusionary perspective, in this section we will focus on how some aspects of this process have resulted into hegemonic models of culture-led development, that can lead to a harmful change in social meanings at odds with the local community's identity and consistency.

Firstly, we examined the content of the NoLo Social District virtual group and noted some critical issues that reveal an unbalanced process of selective empowerment, as well as a vertical indirect discerning based on cultural preferences and behaviours that provoked uneven engagement. Indeed, in one of the most multi-ethnic districts of Milan, Italians account for almost the totality of the group. Moreover, the proposed activities - like dancing, acting, indoor gardens and photography lessons, workshops or

contests, yoga and fitness training, breakfasts and happy hours, meetings at clubs, art galleries and art-house cinemas - reflect a post-modern behaviour and pattern of consumption restricted to those social groups defined by a wide literature as gentrifiers (Ley, 1994, 1997; Hamnett, 2003; Karsten, 2003, 2014; Watt, 2008 etc.). They are usually referred to as a set of middle-class families, students, young professionals and members of the creative class (Florida, 2002) that perceive neighbourhoods as fields accessible through capital and as a stage for the accumulation of various forms of capital associated with the habits of the middle class (Boterman et al., 2010). The cultural distance between the proposed activities and the context of multi-ethnic periphery, within which the activities are meant to take place, seems to reveal a willingness to fix an apparent social discrepancy by introducing new habits, rather than the intention to merge with the existing ones.

Secondly, by cross-referencing the data collected during the ethnography with statements from several residents and key informants we tried to investigate the tangible level of impact of the neighbourhood's urban renewal. The result is a clear widening of the gap between old and new residents, especially concerning the marginalization of the old, non-Italian residents. Dialogue and negotiation seem to be lacking between the two main groups, and many critical issues stem from mutual exclusion.

The majority of the old residents of foreign origin and most of the old residents of Italian origin declared that they do not know or frequent the new galleries and have never been directly involved in new creative events in the neighbourhood. None of them perceives the development of new artistic and cultural activities as an endeavour aimed at improving public space or community's cohesion; they consider all those news as issues not belonging to their behaviours and rituals, not related to the sense they give to their places (Tartari et al., 2020). The same goes for their take on Italian restaurants, pubs, and amenities recently opened in the neighbourhood: they could not perceive any benefit, but only an increase in prices. Most of them declare that these places are too expensive and/or not frequented by their friends and relatives (in terms of social activity) and that they prefer older, but more familiar and affordable businesses. Many of the old inhabitants are disappointed by the idea of hosting a Food District in the Station warehouse nearby. The most recurrent comment is that old businesses and independent shops selling everyday products are slowly closing to give space to new, more expensive restaurants and pubs, revealing a substantial impact on low-income people's sense of place. Most of the places that disappeared or were renovated were those that made them feel comfortable. Despite the increase in the number of restaurants, cafés, and bars, long-term residents observed there were fewer places to go to, adding to the loss of social contact they already experienced in feeling excluded from places affected by artistic and cultural gentrification. Old people and residents of foreign origin currently do not understand what is happening before their eyes, increasingly feeling a sense of loss of familiar surroundings and of control, caused by a lack of involvement in the decision-making process. They do not have any critical instrument to identify the symbolic signs of change and they are defenceless and weak in reacting against the estrangement of their social classes. They face many

difficulties in finding or creating alternatives, therefore they perceive loss of place identity when economic opportunities, social enhancement, and cultural belonging are undermined.

Several studies explore the array of emotions expressed by marginalised residents in contexts of uneven social and urban development: from feelings of grief (Marris, 1974), due to a process that affects their daily lives, to the loss of meaningful places for everyday social practices (Fried, 1963), to the destruction of the model of the world that had existed in the individual's head (Fullilove, 2004). Identification, belonging and daily gatherings at places of residence are the only way to develop social ties for those who have a low economic status. The respondents' revelations lead us to consider NoLo's engagement efforts from a different perspective, in terms of making a crucial differentiation of impacts between selective empowerment, based on vertical engagement of a specific audience, and more recognised, inclusive, and horizontal models of community empowerment (Ledwith, 1997; Travers, 1997). Indeed, the antidote consists in participatory inclusion processes of empowerment in spatial status negotiation projects, that transform space into a place of shared participation (D'Ovidio & Moratò 2017, Pradel-Miquel, 2017). Empowerment adds to the mere engagement a component of sharing and redistribution of power, control (Arnstein, 1969) and knowledge - created through an explicit involvement in decision-making processes (Saxena, 1998). Considering the negative outputs that affected an important part of the old and foreigner residents, the concept of selective empowerment that sustained the birth of NoLo taints the whole process with its paternalistic vision.

The agents of change needed to have a great echo to spread NoLo's rebirth: when they present themselves as *demiurges*, pursuing the objective of reaching the greatest possible number of people with a vertical perspective, they enact a superficial participative involvement for community consensus, and the community itself might be easily unaware of the extent and implications of the manipulation (Sacco et al, 2019). In literature, there are plenty of examples for abuse of participation, ranging from promotion of hidden agendas (White, 1996), to deceptive participation (Arnstein, 1969; Pretty, 1995), to the instrumental involvement of minorities (Bailey, 2012). A participative project succeeds when it concretely entails the attribution of a certain share of power through an exchange process between the members of the community, the drivers of the change and the community members who are involved, enabling said community to pursue its own goals and affirm its own cultural orientations (Tomka, 2013). As a solution counteracting selective empowerment, it would be beneficial to renegotiate intentions, cooperate and co-create dialectically with the whole local community from the very beginning to the moment of redistribution of capital, in order to avoid a loss of place identity, articulate the strengthening of the local constituency (Saxena, 1998), and pave the way for the re-appropriation of sense and urban space. Such a process can only be possible through a real exchange of values between new and old residents in the form of trust-building (Aitken, 2012), creation of community assets (Cornelius & Wallace, 2010) and individual capabilities (Saxena, 1998).

Conclusions

This article explores the 'NoLo' neighbourhood as a case study of place branding developed through a bottom-up movement, a typology of territorial branding scarcely analysed in the contemporary academic debate.

To perform this analysis, we connected the growing body of literature about territorial branding with the reflections upon loss of place identity, observing NoLo's transformation through these theoretical lenses. Both empirical and theoretical contributions have been presented through this approach.

From an empirical point of view, we illustrated the process and the actors that made the affirmation of the new name possible as a toponym without top-down investments from urban big players, as commonly observed in the literature. We analysed the specific function played by three different actors, that we identified as the engine, the backbone, and the trigger of the process. We also illustrated how, even though the new toponym grew in popularity characterising the neighbourhood as the 'new creative district of Milan' in which many inhabitants identified themselves, a hiatus emerged between old and new inhabitants. The first group experienced a loss of place identity: they do not recognise themselves in the new label and do not generally go to the new shops that opened, preferring the old ones, whose number they nevertheless see decline. This distinction is felt by most of the old residents, both Italians and foreigners; it is determined by a cultural ethos of resonance with the narrative of NoLo as 'new creative hub' of Milan, rather than by nationality.

Thus, our study constitutes a first attempt to fill a gap in existing literature about processes of local branding emerging from below, suggesting that a territorial branding led from a group of local residents can engage a part of the community, but at the same time it is not sufficient to empower it as a whole, falling into a lack of entitlement and into a loss of place identity and missing the opportunity to kick off a best practice for an open city (Sennett, 2017).

From a theoretical point of view, this research contributes to the emerging theories about place branding. Existing research, as seen in the literature review, focus on cases of top-down rebranding or branding led by big urban players. In such examples, it was consequential for the general population to show a sense of extraneity toward the imposed brand/toponym. Showing that the same sense of estrangement can happen when the brand, or toponym, is promoted by a local community led us to reflect upon the nature of these processes: the choice itself to promote a toponym as a brand, using it as part of a broader narrative (of the 'growing creative district of Milan' in this specific case) inspired by fancy and trendy NYC neighbourhoods meant its promoters were using it as a strategic marketing tool, rather than as a community-building sounding board. In short, they were looking to maximise the circulation and recognition of the brand, rather than creating a real democratic and participatory practice of empowerment of the local inhabitants.

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