Is a smart sustainable city a marketing-oriented city?

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Abstract

More recently, the instrumentalist approach to the the smart city concept, which emphasises different ICT solutions, is being replaced by a functionalist approach which focuses on the purpose of the smart city. If this purpose is identified with adapting to the needs of current and future generations of citizens, a strong convergence between the concepts of the smart sustainable city and the marketing-oriented city can be predicted in the near future. In my paper I have try to detect the first signs of this convergence process in the Hungarian discourse on the development of smart sustainable cities. Therefore, I empirically analyse the sustainable urban development strategies of the most important Hungarian cities prepared between 2021 and 2024, which are key for the use of EU funds for sustainable urban development. The analysis focuses primarily on the different approaches to the concept of city marketing and the peculiarities of their use, using the methodological tool of content analysis. The results are rather mixed: although the cities analysed almost without exception try to integrate marketing (especially sales communication) into the practice of smart sustainable urban development, the majority of these documents are still not sufficiently customer-oriented. Moreover, the lack of an integrated marketing approach is also a very typical problem, mainly due to the dominance of sectoral marketing limited to tourism or economic development and/or the absence of a management approach. However, in the absence of a correct and complete use of the city marketing concept, there is little chance of really good practices of smart sustainable urban development being established in the near future. The main aim of this paper is to draw the attention of urban policy practitioners and academics to this danger.

Keywords: city marketing, urban development, Hungary

1. Introduction

The smart city has become one of the most important, almost hype-like, concepts in the urban development discourse. Of course, the smart city is much more than "*a label or brand of successfulnes*" [1]. Let us start with a widely used instrumentalist approach, which suggests that the meaning of smart city is closest to a city that makes extensive use of and benefits from ICT solutions. Such approaches reflect well on certain ICT developments that can be interpreted as direct precursors of systematic smart city concepts, often linked to specific multinational companies. The beginning of the history of smart cities is therefore often associated with 1974, when the Los Angeles Community Analysis Bureau used IBM 360 mainframe computers to create a database of 550 social and physical factors to provide real-time data to city policymakers [2]. The smart city concept has nevertheless always been more complex than the above-mentioned technocratic interpretations would suggest. To mention just a few, the 2007 definition of a smart city by Rudolf Giffinger and his colleagues, considered to be one of the origins of the academic discourse on the smart city concept, undoubtedly focuses on smart industries operating in the field of information and communication technologies and using ICT solutions in their production processes. However, a number of other aspects are also mentioned, such as *"a well-educated population"*, *"good governance"*, and the concepts of *"safety"*, *"green"*, *"efficient and sustainable*" and *"energy"* [127]. But we could also refer to another basic definition of the smart city discourse, which stresses the importance not only of *"modern (ICT) communication infrastructure"* but also of *"investments in human and social capital and*

traditional (transport) (...) infrastructure", while identifying *"wise management of natural resources through participatory governance"* as a means to achieve the smart city, and "*sustainable economic growth and a high quality of life*" as an end [4]. Or even more generally, "*the smart city represents a complex ecosystem of people, processes, policies, technology, facilitators working together in view to deliver a set of outcomes*" [5].

Although the study of technological challenges in general (e.g. the management of IOT-generated data [6]), the data security [7]) as well as smart sectors supported by ICT (e.g. public transport [8], healthcare [9] or street lighting [10]) are still central parts of the smart city discourse, the definitions presented in the previous sub-section already anticipate a paradigmatic shift in the meaning of the smart city that has taken place in the decade of 2010. The direction of the smart city discourse, which paved the way for moving beyond a technology-based understanding of the smart city during its "critical phase" between 2012 and 2015 [11] and then gained new momentum from the second half of the 2010s, can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, we can speak of a societal turn in the smart city approach, which is based on the recognition that technologies, which should be seen as mere tools, cannot become an end in themselves for smart cities, and that the well-being of people must remain at the centre of urban development efforts [12]. The other interpretation can be outlined in terms of sustainability and sustainable urban development. This has been driven by an ecological approach that has replaced the modernist paradigm of pursuing (economic) growth at all costs. The ecological approach no longer separates humans and the environment as two different entities, let alone asserts that humans can once and for all subjugate their environment, but sees human and environmental (especially natural) systems as dynamic, evolutionary and interdependent systems [13]. However, in addition to the focus on maintaining a balance with natural systems, a much broader understanding of sustainability has been present from the outset, which seeks to capture the essence of a smart city based on the three (environmental, economic and social) pillars of sustainability, and the dynamic interaction between them [14]. The converging concepts of the "smart" and "sustainable" city have ultimately given rise to the discourse of the smart sustainable city [15] [16] [17] [18], which since the second half of the 2010s has increasingly influenced the urban policy of the European Union [19] beyond the academic sphere. For example, the New Leipzig Charter, adopted in 2020, which can be interpreted as one of the EU's current urban development core documents, in line with the mainstream definitions of smart sustainable cities, now sees digitalisation only as a "*major transformative, cross-sectoral trend affecting all dimensions of sustainable urban development*" [20], i.e. as a tool for sustainable urban development (cf. [21] [22]), rather than as an end in itself, typical of technocratic approaches. It can be argued that, in contrast to the instrumentalist smart city approaches of the past, the smart city discourse is increasingly dominated by a functionalist approach that focuses on the (long-term) sustainable well-being of citizens and seeks to provide a more precise definition and/or critical examination of the key components of a smart sustainable city, be it sustainability [23], quality of life of citizens [24] or their participation in the urban development [25].

In the following paper, I express my conviction that smart sustainable cities must also become marketing-oriented cities, and that the beginnings of this convergence process are already visible in the practice of recent urban development in Hungary. Let us start from

the fact that the literature considers customer orientation and adaptation to customer needs to be one of the most important characteristics of marketing. One of the most influential figures of marketing management in the 20th century, *Peter Drucker*, directly claims that "*the aim of marketing is to know and understand the customer so well that the product or service fits him and sells itself"* [26]. The image that a product or service will fit the customer in a self-evident way and "sell itself" once the seller has come to know and understand the customer's needs is, of course, misleading in many ways. We consider the model of István Piskóti, a prominent representative of place marketing in Hungary, to be more accurate, according to which the seller - in our case, mainly the city administration - actively shapes and forms its core competences in the areas of supply and communication in order to gain trust and recognition for the geographical place it manages [27]. Piskóti's model of competence-based place marketing includes, among many other things, the Druckerian knowledge and understanding of customer needs, sales communication (the communicative core competences), but also a wide range of activities related to the supply core competencies. By the latter I mean, first and foremost, the physical design and shaping of the various elements of the product and service package associated with the city as a complex local product (development of existing elements, creation of new ones). Nevertheless, adapting to customer needs is the undisputed starting point of city marketing.

The chances of creating a city focused on the (long-term) sustainable well-being of its citizens will certainly be enhanced if urban society is not only a passive recipient but also an active participant in the design of smart development policies at the local level. In this respect, it is worth referring to the insights of Boyd Cohen, a key contemporary theorist of smart cities, who distinguishes three phases of smart city projects and initiatives: (1) the technology-driven smart city phase 1.0, mainly linked to the market penetration efforts of large multinational corporations; (2) the city-led smart city phase 2.0 driven by forward-thinking mayors and city administrators; (3) and the latest citizen co-created smart city phase 3.0, considered as the result of collaboration with citizens [28]. Of course, there is a lot of simplification in this approach. This is mainly because the forward-looking nature of smart sustainable urban development projects is ensured not only by community participation but also by ICT solutions, which should be interpreted as necessary, if not sufficient, tools for smart urban development. Furthermore, in order to create a smart sustainable city, it is important to engage not only with "*citizens"*, but also with other target groups relevant to the "*selling of the city*" [29].

On the basis of the above, cities managed by an administration that is driven by the needs of, and able to interact with [30], different target groups can rightly be called marketing-oriented smart sustainable cities. In fact, we could make an even stronger claim. There simply cannot be a smart sustainable city without marketing orientation, thanks to the close link between marketing orientation and the functionalist smart city approach. In the following short case study, we will therefore try to answer whether and how the demand-driven understanding of city marketing outlined above can be found in the process of institutionalising of smart sustainable cities in Hungary.

2. Material and methodology

The smart sustainable city, which gained ground in the European Union in the second half of the 2010s, entered the mainstream of Hungarian urban development policy at the beginning of the 2021-2027 programming cycle. Accordingly, the Government Decree 256/2021 (V. 18.) on the rules for the use of certain EU funds in the 2014-2020 programming period called for the preparation of sustainable urban development strategies (hereinafter: SDS documents) by the cities designated for this purpose in the integrated territorial programmes of the Hungarian counties [31]. In the summer of 2021, the Managing Authority for Regional Development Programmes under the Ministry of Finance, published the Methodological Manual for Sustainable Urban Development Strategies 2021-2027, based on EU recommendations [32]. The manual defines five so-called design dimensions for the "*resilient city*" that is able to withstand the ever-increasing shocks of crisis [33]: the "*prosperous city*", the "*greening city*", the "*digital city*", the "*retaining city*" and the "*serving city*" dimensions. In other words, although the title promises only a methodological guide to the design only of a sustainable city, the economic, environmental, technological, social and (public) service organisation dimensions opened up by the terms "*prosperous city*", "*greening city*", "*digital city*", "*retaining city*" and "*serving city*" lead to a more complex concept of a smart sustainable city. We are particularly interested here in the question of the role that marketing orientation, i.e. taking into account the needs of different customer target groups, and possibly working with them, can play in the creation of the smart sustainable city. More specifically, do the SDS documents use the concept of city marketing and, if so, is the term "city marketing" used in them consistent with a demand-driven approach. My empirical research makes use of two simplifications that help to process the source material:

- I have searched the SDS documents for those and only those passages - and their immediate context – in which the terms "*marketing*" or "*city marketing*" appear. Although this kind of content analysis method excludes the investigation of instinctive "don't know but do" type marketing orientation, we can rightly assume that a genuine marketing orientation can only be based on a conceptually constructed city marketing concept, and that an explicit reference to the term "*(city) marketing*" is a prerequisite for this.

- The aim of my research is not to analyse all cities that prepare SDS documents. I will limit my attention to the 25 cities with county rights + the capital Budapest, which are the most important municipalities and the most important actors of smart sustainable urban development in Hungary. As these cities can also serve as a guideline for others, I believe that such a limited database can also provide enough ammunition to access the current state of city marketing. In the end, however, I was only able to determine the degree of marketing orientation for 24 cities. As for the two exceptions: *Szombathely* does not explicitly refer to the concept of city marketing at all [34]; *Tatabánya* refers to the concept of city marketing once, in the context of an incubator house for the creation of start-ups - which is not the right context to draw any conclusions about Tatabánya's preferred meaning of the term "*(city) marketing*" [35].

I will try to explore the degree of marketing orientation of Hungarian cities with county rights based on the classification of the use of the term "*(city) marketing*" introduced in one of my previous studies [36], but somewhat refined below. Accordingly, I distinguish three main ways of using the term "*(city) marketing*" in the SDS strategies:

- *a primary narrowing of the concept of city marketing*, i.e. limiting the meaning of city marketing to sales communication;
- *a secondary narrowing of the concept of city marketing*, which already includes the physical design and shaping of the city's supply core competence structure, but does not yet include the consideration of customer needs in this process;
- *a demand-driven interpretation of city marketing*, where the physical design and shaping associated with the city is already done by taking into account the needs of the customer.

Contrary to my earlier position of identifying demand-driven approaches with "correct and complete" interpretations of city marketing, I also examine whether the SDS documents in question contain an integrated approach to city marketing. According to Piskóti, "*integrated marketing strategies are built on the basis of several decision dimensions, behavioural criteria, and they build up the strategic profile of the organisation in a professional, logical order*" [37]. Leaving aside the difficulties of interpretation posed by the abstract nature of the terms "*decision dimensions"* or *"behavioural criteria*", I would just like to make just two related observations. On the one hand, restricting the term "*(city) marketing*" to specific sectors (e.g. tourism or economic marketing) limits our interpretations of city marketing to the sectoral marketing, which can hardly be called integrated. And neglecting the managerial nature of marketing - institutionalised strategic profiling and, as a result, branding - can undermine the effectiveness of city marketing in general. All in all, therefore, the distinction between primarily narrowed, secondarily narrowed and demand-driven interpretations of city marketing needs to be complemented by reflections on the presence/absence of an integrated approach: accordingly, in what follows I will only consider those interpretations of city marketing to be correct and complete that are both demand-driven and integrated.

3. Results of the empirical research
3.1. Primarily narrowed city marketing interpretations

From the perspective of a demand-driven understanding of city marketing, it is somewhat worrying that a significant proportion of the SDS documents we examined, ten municipalities, still use the term "*(city) marketing*" in a primarily narrowed sense. In these cases, city marketing is clearly dominated by concepts linked to sales communication, such as:

- According to *Békéscsaba'*s SDS document, the essence of city marketing is to "*increase visibility*" [38];
- *Budapest* describes city marketing only in terms of communication websites targeting "*the city dwellers*" and "*tourism*", such as azenbudapestem.hu, budapestinfo.hu [39] [40];

- *Eger* associates the concept of effective marketing with the conquest of (tourist) sending destinations with "*attractive offers*" [41];
- *Esztergom* would try to increase the "*low level of awareness*" of the elements underlying the circular economy through marketing [42];
- *Hódmezővásárhely* emphasises the "*investment-stimulating*" nature of marketing activities [43];
- In the *Pécs* SDS document, city marketing appears alongside the concept of "*(investment) promotion*" [44];
- In the SDS document of *Szekszárd*, the concept of marketing is admittedly aimed at selling the existing strengths of the city [45];
- *Debrecen* emphasizes the importance of "*targeted marketing communication campaign activities and sales*" [46];
- *Dunaújváros* intends to improve the operating environment of tourism businesses mainly through "*targeted sales marketing"* [47];
- finally, *Sopron* describes a marketing campaign with national coverage in relation to "*new attractions created in recent years*", but there is no reference to the creation of these attractions as part of the city's marketing.. Thus, in my opinion, the "campaign character" of marketing - linked to sales communication - also predominates in this case [48].

However, even in these cases, there are some indications that the primary narrowing of the concept of city marketing does not necessarily imply a lack of an integrated marketing approach. Only in the cases of Debrecen, Esztergom, and Hódmezővásárhely is there no evidence that the term "*(city) marketing*" is used to mean more than the sales communication of an unnamed sector [46] or specific sectors - the economy in the case of Esztergom and the economy and tourism in the case of Hódmezővásárhely [43]. In two other cases, the authors of the SDS documents use at least one "*and*" conjunction to indicate the difference between city marketing and sales communication. This may be the case in relation to a specific sector, as when Eger aims to attract tourists with "*attractive offers*" and "*targeted, effective marketing*" [41]. Budapest, on the other hand, already crosses sectoral boundaries: within its sustainable urban development goals, Objective III B is simply entitled "*Renewal of communication and city marketing*", including the "*marketing activities for city residents*" as well as the "*tourism*". [39] However, since in both cases it is not clear exactly how far the meaning of the term "*(city) marketing*" extends beyond specific marketing communication activities, we cannot be sure that the passages in question are more than the result of a fuzzy use of language. It would be a mistake to over-interpret the examples of Eger and Budapest accordingly.

In the remaining five cities, there are clear signs of an integrated marketing approach. However, in the case of Békéscsaba and Sopron and Dunaújváros, this is still only the case within one specific sector - tourism. As far as Békéscsaba is concerned, the term "*image building*" [38] might suggest the marketing management is trying to go beyond the

visibility of isolated tourist attractions. In the case of Sopron and its region, the "*repositioning*" of the tourist offer [48], which can hardly be separated from the emergence of new attractions in recent years, could lead to the (re)construction of the existing brand. Finally, in the case of Dunaújváros, perhaps the most important concept in tourism marketing management, the destination [49], is also used, which suggests that the authors do not only want to market isolated attractions, but also the complex host area (the destination) constructed by the management [47].

Finally, the clearest statement of support for an integrated marketing approach can be found in the SDS document of Pécs, where the authors clearly distance themselves from "*marketing 'flavoured' sub-area proposals*" and contrast them with "*the integrated, complex, systemic optimisation of city management*". And although the confusion between sectoral ("*sub-area*") marketing and marketing suggests some conceptual confusion, it does not hide the fact that the integrated, complex, systemic optimisation of city management is the key direction for the city marketing in Pécs, for example in the design of a "*coherent city image*", which appears explicitly in this SDS document [50].

3.2. Secondarily narrowed city marketing interpretations

Seven SDS documents belong to the secondarily narrowed interpretations of city marketing that already physically design and shape the city's supply core competence structure through concrete developments, but do not yet mention the consideration of customer needs:

- *Baja* goes beyond the level of existing attractions by "*tourism developments based on natural-environmental values*" [51];
- *Győr* refers to the achievements of the tourism product development in the context of the five events (*Children's Festival in Győr, Baroque Feast, Advent in Győr, Hungarian Dance Festival, Five Churches Festival*) that won the "*Highlight Cultural and Heritage Tourism Events of the Western Transdanubian Region*" competition in 2012 [52];
- The SDS document of *Zalaegerszeg*, whose marketing interpretation usually focuses on existing attractions/services, sometimes goes further in the direction of designing and shaping the supply core competence structure, for example by "*organising events (...) with the aim of image building* " or "*expanding and developing the area of the Market Square, primarily for tourism purposes*" [53];
- *Nagykanizsa* emphasises the importance of "*Attraction development*" and "*Renewal of existing elements*" within the "*Development of sustainable regional tourism and recreation offer*" development area [54];
- *Szeged* takes a similar approach, considering not only strategic brand communication, targeted marketing communication campaign activities and sales, but also "*product and attraction development based on destination logic*" as relevant for the city in line with Hungary's core tourism strategy entitled National Tourism Development Strategy 2030 - Tourism 2.0 Strategy [55];

- *Veszprém* writes about the importance of *"cultural and attraction development"* and *"related programme and infrastructure developments"* in relation to the title of European Capital of Culture 2023 [56];
- Finally, in the case of *Székesfehérvár*, city marketing plays a key role iu "*the renewal of urban spaces and the more sophisticated regulation of land use*" [57].

What the above mentioned SDS documents have in common is that they all consider the physical design and shaping of the city's supply core competence structure to be important, but it remains unclear whether the development activities take into account the needs of the target customer groups. Of course, none of the texts explicitly deny this, but the lack of concrete reflection means that there is a great risk that developers, pretending to be omniscient in the city design and shaping process, will misunderstand or even neglect this perhaps most important aspect of marketing orientation.

The picture is also unclear with regard to the integrated marketing approach of the city marketing interpretations that fall into this group. With the exception of Nagykanizsa, the SDS documents may go beyond clearly partial marketing approaches here and there, but the integrated marketing approach is usually not become systematic. In the case of Szeged's tourism marketing, for example, we can mention the reference to the "*destination logic*" [55]. And Győr writes - albeit in a rather vague way - about "*building a city brand*" in a passage praising the importance of the Győri ETO Handball Club [58]. As far as Székesfehérvár is concerned, it is the crossing of sectoral boundaries that is the most remarkable, as the SDS document aims to equally improve "*the economic (labour capital, conference tourism) and quality of life attractiveness of the city*" through the renewal of urban spaces and more sophisticated land use regulation [57]. The SDS documents for Zalaegerszeg and Baja, however, go further than the previous ones by making marketing activities the responsibility of a specialised institution. The Tourist Destination Management Organisation of Zalaegerszeg, as its name suggests, goes beyond the boundaries of individual products/attractions and even the city itself, towards the development of the *"Zala brands"* [59]. Finally, the institution set up by the municipality of Baja (Baja Marketing Ltd.) also working in areas other than tourism marketing, such as "*developing a strategy to strengthen digital competences*" [60].

3.3. Demand-driven city marketing interpretations
The marketing interpretations of the remaining seven cities not yet mentioned all include some reflection of customer needs:
- *Kaposvár* would facilitate the development of tourism products and marketing activities by learning about the "*characteristics of tourists visiting the city and its region*" [61];
- As far as *Érd* is concerned, the importance of assessing needs is mentioned in the case of shared services [62];
- A similar reflection on assessing needs for shared services is also made in *Salgótarján*'s SDS document [63];

- *Szolnok* clearly states that "*market research*" is needed to increase the city's attractiveness for tourism [64];
- For *Kecskemét*, strengthening of local society can only be achieved by a complex programme "*based on broad social involvement*" [65];
- *Nyíregyháza* writes about "*market research and surveys*" in the context of destination tourism marketing activities [66];
- *Miskolc* - as we will see later - would build on the "*involvement internal and external target groups*" in the broadest and most complex way of all the examples presented so far [67].

We have already seen that demand orientation alone is not a correct and complete interpretation of city marketing. Indeed, Érd, Salgótarján, Kaposvár, Szolnok and Kecskemét, for example, describe customer needs only in relation to a specific sector – Érd [62] and Salgótarján [63] for shared services, Kaposvár [61] and Szolnok [64] for tourism, and Kecskemét [65] for strengthening local society. Of course, this sectoral approach can be somewhat counterbalanced by a more complex, management-oriented understanding of city marketing. This is essentially the case in five SDS documents mentioned above. Salgótarján [68] and Szolnok [64] envisage the creation of a Tourism Destination Management (TDM) organisation, which does not yet exist. However, in the case of Érd [69], Kaposvár [70] amd Keckemét [71] there is already an existing TDM organisation.

A correct and complete interpretation of city marketing can therefore be limited to a maximum of two cities. In the case of Nyíregyháza, however, this is not necessarily the case. Although the SDS document of Nyíregyháza promises "*the implementation of complex management and marketing activities at the county-level*", the tasks envisaged reflect the customer needs only in the case of one specific sector, the above-mentioned "*destination tourism marketing activities*." [72] Consequently, only Miskolc has an interpretation of city marketing that can be considered correct and complete in all respects. When the Press, Communication and City Marketing Department, which has been established within the municipality itself, was given the task of "*ensuring a broad partnership in the developments of individual projects, the involvement of the relevant actors and local residents, and the necessary flow of information and up-to-date information during the implementation of specific projects*", a decisive step was undoubtedly been taken towards marketing-oriented, smart, sustainable urban development based on the participation of the target groups [67].

4. Conclusion
Recently, the instrumentalist approach to the concept of the smart city, which has concentrated exclusively on different ICT solutions, is being replaced by a functionalist approach that focuses on the purpose of the smart city. If this purpose is identified with adapting to the needs of current and future generations of citizens, a strong convergence between the concepts of the smart sustainable city and the marketing-oriented city can be predicted in the near future. In my paper, I tried to find the first signs of this marketing orientation in the practice of smart sustainable urban development in Hungary, by analysing

the sustainable urban development strategies of the most important Hungarian municipalities (officially: the cities with county rights) and the capital Budapest. The results are rather mixed: on the one hand, it is encouraging that almost without exception the documents analysed attempt to integrate marketing in some way into the practice of smart sustainable urban development. On the other hand, it is unfortunate that the relative majority of these strategies still limit the concept of city marketing to sales communication. Moreover, the interpretations of city marketing – with the exception of Miskolc example - cannot be considered correct and complete even in cases where the relevant SDS documents go beyond limiting the concept of city marketing to this level. In addition to the neglect of customer needs, a very typical problem is the lack of an integrated marketing approach, which is reflected in the dominance of sectoral marketing (mainly focused on tourism or economic development) and/or the absence of a management approach. It is clear that without a correct and complete interpretation of city marketing, there is little chance of really good practices of smart sustainable urban development being introduced in the near future. This paper has hopefully drawn attention to this danger.

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