
Desired Image of the Place of Residence as Perceived by Residents of the Municipality

Submitted 02/10/23, 1st revision 20/10/23, 2nd revision 16/11/23, accepted 30/12/23

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Abstract:

Purpose: The purpose of this article is to introduce the concept of place image and to indicate which elements, in the opinion of the inhabitants, make up the desired image of a place.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The article is based on an analysis of the literature on the subject and the author's own research conducted on a representative sample of adult Poles (N=1067).

Findings: In the study, the author focused on exploring the residents' desired image of their place of residence. Building a place image in line with residents' expectations is crucial in order to increase their involvement in the local community, which contributes to its sustainable development.

Practical Implications: Residents who identify with a positive image of their place of residence are more likely to actively participate in local initiatives, support local businesses and encourage others to visit or live in the municipality.

Originality/Value: The article presents the results of own research. The issue presented has not previously been addressed in discussions published internationally.

Keywords: Image of the place of residence, territorial marketing, opinions of residents.

JEL codes: M31, R50.

Paper type: Research article.

Research funding: The project is financed within the framework of the program of the Minister of Science and Higher Education under the name "Regional Excellence Initiative" in the years 2019 – 2022; project number 001/RID/2018/19; the amount of financing PLN 10,684,000.00.

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1. Introduction

The development of a city or region is determined by the influx of growth drivers, which are limited and difficult to obtain. For this reason, individual cities compete to attract and retain the human, financial, technological and natural resources that are necessary for their development. It is important to realise that cities and regions have always existed in markets of different kinds: competing for resources, investors and residents (Ashworth and Voogt, 1994).

The interest in the image of the municipality has been significantly influenced by the transformation of territorial municipalities into fully-fledged market participants. This resulted in the need to compete with other units and a significant activation of marketing activities to access limited development resources (Markowski, 2002; Szromnik, 2016).

Local government authorities started to think in terms of competitive strategies, as cities have to compete for subsidies, for EU funds, for new investors (Rurański, Niemczyk 2013). In the era of information overload and social media, it is the attractive image of a place that attracts potential residents, tourists or investors (Boryczka and Sulikowski, 2008).

The territorial product, referred to by Markowski (2002) as magaproduct, is in fact a multiplicity and variety of specific products, so-called sub-products, which are distinguished based on their main utility and offered and exchanged with an appropriate, relatively homogeneous group of actors.

The market approach to the territorial product emphasises the importance of the needs and preferences of the target market and the need to create appropriate values based on the assets of the place (Nieżgoda, 2012). Szromnik (2016) defines a territorial product in terms of a bundle of exchanged benefits located in a specific geographical space.

It should be noted that the need arises for the interaction of different stakeholder groups, including private companies and organisations and local communities, influencing the attractiveness and perception of a place (Laws *et al.*, 2011). The local government plays the biggest role in shaping the offer for residents, businesses and tourists. In addition, it largely influences the shaping of the image of a place through the preparation, organisation and coordination of the territorial unit's marketing projects. The local government has to reconcile four key objectives (Buhalis, 2000):

- increasing the long-term prosperity of residents,
- maximising visitor satisfaction,
- maximising the profitability of local businesses,
- ensuring a sustainable balance of activities (maximising economic benefits and minimising socio-cultural and environmental costs).

The marketing orientation in the context of urban development management in Poland started to be introduced about thirty years ago, and this is due to the spread of market economy principles.

Nevertheless, the idea of place marketing and the initial practical attempts to implement it in Polish urban policy can be dated to the first years of the 21st century (Glińska, 2008; Szromnik, 2016). The aim of this article is to introduce the concept of place image and to indicate what elements make up the desired image of a place.

2. Literature Review

Both tourists, students and, increasingly, potential employees, are looking for attractive places to realise their plans. Many decision-makers consciously or unconsciously take into account the created image of cities, municipalities or regions, are guided by it and take it into account when choosing places for investment, study or leisure. The right image for a city, rural municipality or region does not develop on its own.

A positive and attractive image of a city is often the first element that makes it possible to take initial decisions, to adopt a general direction of action, to proceed to further searches or to check specific information (Dudek-Mańkowska, 2011; Szromnik, 2016). The desire to better and more effectively meet the needs of the inhabitants causes an adaptation of the marketing orientation from the private sector to the public sector.

The city becomes a product, but also a provider of goods for which the resident, entrepreneur, tourist, being in a sense a customer, pays in the form of taxes as well as various additional fees. This view of the relationship between the city and stakeholder groups has led to the popularisation of territorial marketing (Rurański and Niemczyk, 2013).

Even when the economic situation is deteriorating, well-known and attractive cities and regions find it easier to overcome difficulties and raise funds for further investments. They receive a credit of confidence from their creditors, stemming from the belief that after a period of economic downturn, it is this place or region that will most quickly attract tourists and new investors.

An image is also referred to as a picture - it is an image formed from a large number of associations and various pieces of information associated with a place. The image, therefore, is the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions people have about a city (Kotler *et al.*, 1999). M Lalli and W Plöger assume that the image of a city is the external form of its image as a whole. It is an image that has been formed through direct and indirect contacts with a given city in the minds of its inhabitants or members of other social groups. The image of a city is a product of the individual's own imagination, i.e., the internal perception of the city and its

inhabitants, which is the result of the processes of communicating with it and participating in various events (Lalli and Plöger, 1991).

According to W. Gartner, the image of a city is the resultant of a cognitive element, which is a person's knowledge of a particular place, an emotional element, i.e., feelings towards the city, and a behavioural element, showing willingness to take specific actions (Gartner, 2009).

The desired image refers to the image of the city that the city's governing bodies and image creation programmes want to convey to other people and institutions, especially opinion leaders outside the city. This image is carefully shaped and controlled in order to achieve as close to the desired model as possible.

The target image, on the other hand, refers to the hypothetical image of the locality or region, which is the long-term vision that territorial authorities consciously and deliberately want to shape (Szromnik, 2016). For city managers, the division between self-image and foreign image is important. The basic distinction in this division is the affiliation of the people who perceive and evaluate the city to specific audiences.

If the image of a city among its inhabitants is considered, one speaks of self-image. A variation of this is the image fixed in the minds of city officials. A city's foreign image, on the other hand, is the image of the city in the minds of representatives of the wider environment - regional, national and international (Szromnik, 2016).

City or regional managers note that providing the right values and promoting them, results in greater satisfaction of residents and entrepreneurs, attracting tourists or investors (Adamowicz and Zwolińska-Ligaj, 2019). Nowadays, shaping a positive and attractive image of a city is becoming an important goal of urban policy, which can be observed from the increased interest of authorities in creating strategic documents focused on image issues (such as city branding strategies, city image strategies or city promotion strategies) and including these elements in key city documents or placing particular emphasis on them (Grzyś, 2017) .

3. Survey Methodology

The empirical data were obtained by surveying adult Polish residents conducted by the BioStat Research and Development Centre[®]. The survey was carried out between 21 September and 12 October 2022 using the CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interview) technique and was based on an electronic proprietary questionnaire, which was completed by respondents independently using the Opinion Research consumer panel (<https://www.badanie-opinii.pl/>).

In accordance with the assumptions, sampling was carried out in such a way as to obtain a random group of respondents with a 95% confidence level and a 3%

maximum error. The final sample size was 1,067 people and was selected using two-stage stratified random sampling.

Table 1 presents the characteristics of the respondents based on the information contained in the particulars.

Table 1. Respondents' socio-demographic characteristics (N=1067)
Total (%)

Gender	
Female	70.8%
Male	29.2%
Age	
18-29 years	25.0%
30-39 years	29.0%
40-49 years	18.0%
With over 50 years	28.0%
Education level	
Primary Education	3.0%
Vocational School	13.0%
Secondary and Post-secondary Education	45.0%
Higher Education	39.0%
Place of residence	
Countryside	32.0%
City up to 20,000 inhabitants	23,7%
City with 20,000 to 50,000	19.7%
City with over 50,000 inhabitants	24.6%

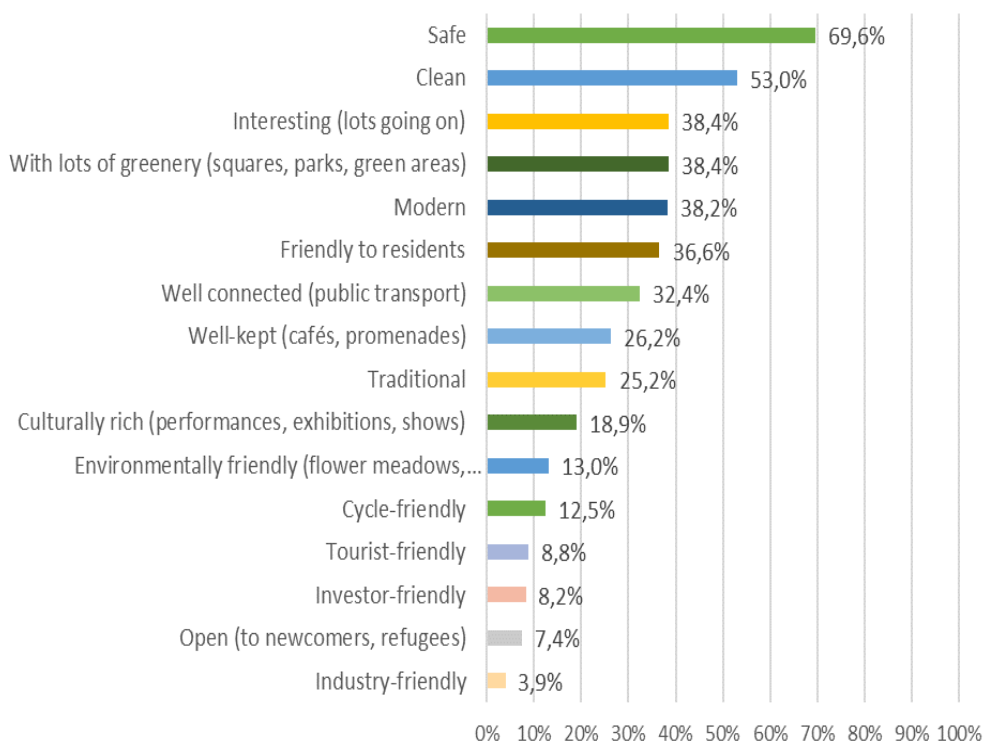
Source: Own study based on the results of the study.

Prior to the draw, respondents were stratified by voivodeship, and then within voivodeships by class of place of residence, distinguishing large cities - over 50,000 inhabitants, medium-sized cities - 20-50,000 inhabitants, small cities - under 20,000 inhabitants and rural areas.

4. Results

The question asked respondents about the aspects with which they would like their municipality to be associated. The question was of a multiple-choice nature. Respondents were able to select a maximum of 5 out of 16 suggested answer options. The results of the responses to this question are illustrated in the chart below.

Figure 1. How would you like to be associated with your place of residence? (n=1067)



Source: Own study based on the results of the study.

On the basis of the survey results presented, it can be concluded that most respondents would like their municipality to be perceived, above all, as safe by others (69.6% of indications). More than half of the respondents indicated that they would also like their municipality to be perceived as clean (53%).

More than a third of respondents would also like their place of residence to be associated with lots of greenery (38.4%), a place with lots of activities (38.4%), a place that is friendly to residents (36.6%), good public transport (32.4%) and well-kept with cafes and promenades (26.2%). Also a significant percentage of respondents would like their municipality to be perceived as traditional (25.2%) and culturally rich with an offer of performances, exhibitions or shows (18.9% of indications).

In contrast, few respondents would like their municipality to be associated with being industry-friendly. Less than 4% of the total number of respondents marked such an answer. This can be justified by the fact that industry is usually associated with pollution, dirty air and environmental degradation. Given that almost 40% of respondents believe that their municipality should be associated with a green place,

it is not surprising that few of them would want it to be an industry-friendly place at the same time. There were also very few indications of openness to visitors or refugees (7.4%) or investor-friendliness (8.2%).

Surprisingly, only 8.8% of respondents indicated that they would like their city to be perceived as a tourist destination. Perhaps this is due to overtourism, i.e., problems with too much tourist traffic experienced by residents of many cities (e.g., Wrocław, Kraków, Gdańsk) or smaller towns (Zakopane, Szklarska Poręba, Szczyrk). The answer that the city should be perceived as cycling friendly (12.5%) was also given very few indications.

This may be due to the fact that the increased cycling traffic in towns and cities generates additional problems for cyclists on pavements, making them a danger to pedestrians. Also relatively few residents indicated that they would like their place of residence to be perceived as pro-environment, i.e., with many flowery meadows or wastelands.

This seems to contradict the earlier answer that they want their place of residence to have a lot of greenery (squares, parks, green areas). Unfortunately, both flower meadows and wastelands are still negatively perceived in Poland as neglected places. Also, less frequent mowing or not raking of leaves, as advocated by environmentalists, contradicts how residents want to perceive their places of residence.

At this point, it is worth noting that women selected the answer option "interesting (a lot going on)" significantly more often than men ($p < 0.05$). This response option was chosen by 40.5% of women and 33.4% of men. Women were also statistically significantly more likely to select the answer indicating that their locality should be associated as well connected. This response option was selected by 35.5% of female respondents and 25.1% of male respondents.

The oldest respondents participating in the study were statistically significantly more likely to indicate that their place of residence should be associated as friendly (52.6% of indications in the group of 70 years and older, 30.2% of indications in the group of 30-39 years). It is also worth noting that 38.2% of respondents with basic vocational education and 30.0% of respondents with primary education indicated a response option indicating that their place of residence should be associated as traditional.

For respondents with higher education, the percentage was 19.7%. Residents with the highest net income per person in the household (above PLN 4,000) were more likely to indicate that their city should be associated as investor-friendly (12.8% of indications in this group of respondents) than respondents with incomes between PLN 2001 and 3,000 (7.2% of indications in this response option in this group of respondents) ($p < 0.05$).

Furthermore, it is worth noting that residents of Lubuskie and Podkarpackie voivodeships selected the answer variant "safe" significantly less frequently ($p < 0.05$). Respectively, 42.9% of respondents in Lubuskie and 48.3% of respondents in Podkarpackie selected this answer variant. In the case of the other voivodeships, the percentage exceeded 60%. Respondents from the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship most often selected this answer option (82.1% of indications in this group of respondents).

5. Discussion and Limitations

The process of globalisation is showing a significant impact in the form of a decreasing role of state structures related to their inefficiency, while at the same time the role of cities and regions is increasing. One can observe an increasing autonomy and expansion of the scope of decision-making that rests on local governments (Barber, 2014).

Local government officials are closer to the residents and should manage the territorial unit through the lens of the needs of the residents. The decisions and behaviour of individuals and economic agents are dependent on the quality of the living, working and resource conditions available to them. It is worth noting that for the different target groups of the image, different elements will be important. For this reason, a place should be promoted differently for tourists, businesses or residents.

In the study, the author focused on exploring the residents' desired image of their place of residence. Municipal managers have to reconcile the conflicting interests of residents, investors or tourists. However, residents who pay taxes in the area and are the most numerous seem to be the most important group. Tourist destinations are probably judged from a different perspective by tourists.

They may be noisy, crowded or with poor public transport, as the tourist spends a short time there and such nuisances are normal in fashionable destinations. From a resident's point of view, such elements are a major nuisance. However, many of the elements studied will be similar for the two groups - safety, cleanliness, greenery, modernity or a large number of events, cafes or exhibitions. Therefore, place managers can use these elements to promote themselves to tourists and residents.

The city is referred to in the literature as a mega-product because its shape and scope is historically determined, while constantly changing and evolving. It is extremely complex, consisting of both tangible elements (such as buildings, infrastructure) but also intangible elements (such as atmosphere, culture, characteristics of the inhabitants).

These elements combined together create an effect, or experience, that is accessible to the viewer. K. Lynch emphasised that image refers to emotions and perceptions,

i.e., intangible and subjective qualities (Lynch, 1960). The survey shows that residents want their places of residence to be perceived as modern (38.2%). An important modern trend at the moment is eco-friendliness; however, residents rarely indicate that they would like to see their place of residence promoted as eco-friendly (13% of indications).

Perhaps this is due to negative emotions associated with pro-environmental solutions, which require sacrifices from users and often impair the aesthetics of cities creating an impression of neglect. Also the relatively low openness to cyclists, tourists, investors and industry testify to different priorities of the examined groups. This confirms, that the inhabitants will look at their place of residence first of all through the prism of their needs and will not be willing to give up their comfort or habits in the name of development of the place or increase in popularity of the municipality.

Through skilful management of a city's image, emotional ties to a place can be created, and it is the intangible elements that are difficult to imitate and often constitute a competitive advantage for a city. The image is therefore an intangible resource of a city, which becomes an important factor in achieving competitive advantage and a tool in building its marketing and development strategy (Adamowicz and Zwolińska-Ligaj, 2019). However, it is worth promoting those elements of the image that are important to the groups concerned, but also that unite different interest groups and are common to them.

6. Conclusion

Nowadays, due to increasing competition and the abundance of information available in the media and on the Internet, there is a crucial need to focus on promoting municipalities and cultivating their positive image. This is essential in order to attract residents, tourists and potential investors. In the context of territorial promotion, it is important to understand that municipalities have to compete with each other for the attention and interest of the local community and outsiders.

Therefore, an approach based on marketing strategies that take into account the needs and preferences of the target market and the creation of attractive values based on the unique characteristics of each municipality is necessary. It is worth emphasising that in today's media landscape, the attractive image of a place is often a key factor in attracting new residents, tourists or investors.

Local government plays an extremely important role here, both in shaping the offer available to the local community, entrepreneurs and tourists, and in organising activities related to the promotion of the territorial unit. Therefore, proper promotion of municipalities and care for their positive image are important tasks in contemporary territorial management.

There is a need to focus on shaping a positive image of the municipality or place that meets the needs and expectations of the people living in the area. This is a key element of effective territory management and local identity building. Residents are important stakeholders and their satisfaction and trust are the foundation for the stability and development of a territorial unit.

Therefore, local governments and authorities should actively listen to their residents, study their needs, preferences and adapt their activities and marketing strategies to their expectations. Building a place image in line with residents' expectations is crucial in order to increase their involvement in the local community, which contributes to its sustainable development.

Residents who identify with a positive image of their place of residence are more likely to actively participate in local initiatives, support local businesses and encourage others to visit or live in the municipality. Therefore, building an image in line with residents' expectations is a key aspect of effective territory management.

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