
Changes in the Image of Szczecin between 2013 and 2023 in Empirical Research

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Abstract:

Purpose: Managing a city should be viewed in terms of competitive relationships. Two types of strategic resources should be identified, which are essential and often even decisive for the competitiveness of cities. The first of these is highly competent people. The second resource that shapes the competitiveness of a place is its image. It makes it possible to attract and keep human resources, which are particularly valuable and essential for the development of a place but which have their own, often above-average, expectations. In this context, this article aims to identify management students' perception of the image of Szczecin and the changes in its image over the past decade.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The authors conducted a study on the image of the city of Szczecin. It is one of not the largest but significant urban and academic centres in Poland. It is strongly influenced by larger cities, which results, among other things, in the loss of current and potential highly qualified staff. The study used a survey questionnaire tool. The technique used was CAWI, which PAPI replaced in individual cases (technical difficulties). Respondents were management students of all years of full-time study, both first- and second-cycle, at the Faculty of Economics, Finance and Management at the University of Szczecin. 147 completed questionnaires were obtained out of 340 students. The arbitrary choice of students as a target group aligns with the priorities in the city's development strategy where the research was carried out. The data was compared with data obtained a decade ago.

Findings: The presented comparative analysis of the primary data obtained in the surveys generally revealed a slight improvement in the image of Szczecin as perceived by management students over the last decade. The terms with which respondents most identified were pretty, natural and open. For the first of these, there was a marked improvement in perception, the second a slight improvement, and the third a noticeable deterioration from the results of 10 years ago.

Practical Implications: The presented results and directions of their interpretation may become a voice in the discussion on the current image of Szczecin, the use of the past decade for its building or possible changes in the strategy and directions of activities in the area of city brand management, which is integrated with the strategy of Szczecin's development until 2025. It can provide information on what needs to be done to build a strong brand for Szczecin and attract highly qualified staff. Possible directions for further research were also indicated.

Originality/Value: Own research was conducted on the image of Szczecin in the eyes of students, and changes in perception of the image over the last decade were analysed. The

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proposed procedure seems to be useful in the case of many other cities with similar problems.

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1. Introduction

A competitive perspective is gaining definite popularity in the field of city management. Approaches, concepts and notions created for and used by business organisations are increasingly being used. Competition may concern areas such as residents, tourists, or investors, depending on the conditions, ideas, and the authorities' aspirations. It should be directed at acquiring and maintaining resources that are particularly important from the point of view of the city's development strategy.

According to the modern paradigms of organisational management, human capital comes to mind above all. On the other hand, managing the city's brand and image becomes an essential tool. The authors adopted as the purpose of this article the identification of the perception of the image of Szczecin by management students and the indication of image changes over the past decade.

It should be mentioned that this activity is part of a larger whole. The next stage will involve a comparative analysis of the image of Szczecin and Częstochowa, and, unlike in typical image studies, the authors went one step further by asking what image influences the respondents' decision to stay in or migrate from the city after graduation.

Thus, an answer was sought as to what image of cities is desirable in the eyes of students and graduates to influence their decision to locate their professional lives in the cities indicated. The aim of the study, as defined in this way, may serve as a recommendation for the mayors regarding the actions to be taken in order to increase the competitiveness of the cities in the competition for strategic resources - people

with high qualifications. Due to the large amount of material obtained and the limitations of individual articles, the discussion will be presented in a series of publications.

2. City Management in a Competitive Market

Managing a city, agglomeration, or region should be viewed in terms of competitive relationships. It is expected to use rhetoric from the business world when referring to urban management. As early as the last years of the previous century, Kotler and others (1993) emphasised that places, like any other business, must become an attractive “product” with a developed business base and efficient communications operating in target markets.

They should be viewed as a source of value for exchange partners (Raftowicz-Filipkiewicz, 2009). Similar views can be found in the publications of another marketing management “classic” Porter (1990). This point of view can also be extended to the scale of entire countries, which can adopt national place branding strategies that are also seen as reputational security strategies, especially important in times of crises and uncertainty (Mogensen, 2024).

Many publications indicate that the area taken up is enjoying unflagging popularity today. S. Gönüllüoğlu and S. Arslan Selçuk (2024), after analysing 348 articles from the Web of Science database related to city branding, indicate that the body of knowledge in this area is well-established. At the same time, research gaps are revealed about the interaction between accompanying concepts such as architecture, tourism, culture and cultural identity.

Looking at a city through the prism of management language requires, analogously to the case of “ordinary” products or services, defining the product, target groups, conditions and communication channels (Wiatrak, 2017). Referring to the definition of the product, we can recall the concept of territorial product, which, according to A. Szromnik (2008), takes the form of “the accumulated socio-economic utility of a place (area), offered to internal and external customers for the satisfaction of their material and spiritual, current and developmental needs of a consumption and investment nature.”

This author, referring to target groups, emphasises the importance of the internal customer, in this case, the residents of the place, whose needs and expectations should be recognised and, if possible, satisfied first, before the other groups of the environment. The turn towards residents is also noted by R. Stępowski (2018), who attributes it to the maturity of local government administrators and the development of place marketing in Poland. He writes, “The primary goal is the needs of residents. Tourists and investors are only means to achieve it. Even the best, boldest and most innovative ideas will not make tourists and investors start coming to a city, as well as new residents or students, if current residents do not feel that it is an excellent

place to live, both in terms of wages and quality of jobs, as well as access to culture, education, higher education, sports and recreation, health care, public safety, infrastructure and public transportation.”

Well-known cases demonstrate that the process of city branding influences debates and formal political action by reflecting on areas such as fiscal policy, the minimum wage, public safety or neighbourhood development. It activates residents, nonprofit organisations, religious associations or businesses to act and make demands and claims (Islam, Ruez, and Rahman, 2024).

It should also be noted that an inappropriate selection of goals, target groups or actions can produce unintended consequences, as in the case of, for example, reducing Spanish cities to the role of a commodity in a highly competitive market while neglecting the well-being of residents and creating conflicts with tourists (Escudero-Gómez, 2024).

Ongoing discussions and the evolution of views have resulted in the emergence of the concept of sustainable branding of cities or places. It focuses on considering the needs of the environment, people and the economy, emphasising the need for actions to attract and retain people (Crood and Lincoln, 2023).

Similarly, a city can be seen as a socio-spatial whole characterised by the diversity of structures, connections and cultures coexisting in its area, as well as increased social, political and economic activity (Karwińska, 2011). The high complexity of this specific entity leads to its being referred to as a mega product and, at the same time, to the introduction of a second cognitive perspective besides the holistic view - subproducts, a subset of urban products (Domański, Podlasiak, Gontar, and Korytkowska, 1997).

Individual subproducts should be directed at meeting the needs of particular target groups and maintaining contact with them through the appropriate communication channels. A comprehensive classification of subproducts and target markets is presented by K. Pilch (2023).

Cities on the path of their development, which, as noted, takes place in a competitive environment, compete for access to resources. This competition can occur within traditional areas, such as investment or tourism, and modern areas, such as migration or internal integration. Preferences for these areas should result mainly from the chosen strategy for the development of the place, considering the conditions, trends of change or aspirations of the authorities and residents.

Hence, we can talk about tourist destinations, attractive places for industry, centres of culture and art or creative cities, etc. Due to the growing importance of

knowledge in the economy, there is also a tendency to compete in the area of academic centres or university cities³ (Błoński, Burlita, and Witek, 2016).

By referring to these two concepts, it is possible to draw attention to the possibility of a kind of ecosystem involving universities, businesses and local government. Universities prepare qualified staff, which makes their environment attractive for business. Businesses, especially those involving highly skilled employees, create an attractive labour market for graduates and attract them to study in the area.

In addition, the mutual transfer of knowledge is also mutually beneficial on another level. Companies have access to knowledge and research, universities to information on economic trends and research needs from business practice. In addition, they can conduct commissioned research and solve current business problems. Local government also has a vital role to play.

Here, it is expected to set goals and directions for the development of this system of cooperation and to create the conditions for this. They are promoting the attractiveness of the place for both academic community members and business representatives. Through contacts with universities and businesses, the local authorities gain the opportunity to broaden and update their point of view on the current needs of the community of the place and the emerging trends of change. This allows them to react quickly to identified expectations and perhaps to proactively and anticipatively create conditions that increase the competitiveness of cities and regions.

In this context, two types of strategic resources should be identified, which are essential and often even decisive for the competitiveness of cities. The first of these is people, who, notably for the subject under discussion, are the only carriers of knowledge in organisations. It is worth emphasising that this is particularly true of highly competent people, who are difficult or even impossible to replace by dynamically developing automation or machine thinking. The second resource that shapes the competitiveness of a place is its image. It makes it possible to attract and keep human resources, which are particularly valuable and essential for the development of a place but which have their own, often above-average, expectations.

³Although terms such as academic centre and university city are related and often used interchangeably, the difference in their perception can be noted, which, however, from the point of view of the considerations undertaken in this publication, does not seem to be of key importance here. These concepts do not have a single universally accepted definition. One can refer, for example, to the approach proposed by E. Rewers (2016), which emphasises the criterion of the dominant function. While university cities are smaller centres in which the university function is dominant and has a significant impact on city life and its rhythm, including employment, consumption or communication, in the case of academic centres, often metropolitan ones, this function is one in many, not necessarily accentuated and not dominant.

3. Brand, Identity and Image

A city brand can be used to attract and retain people. The so-called city brand hexagon proposed by Anholt (2007) and the Anholt-Ipsos City Brand Index (IPSOS, 2022) and the Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index (IPSOS, 2023), which are periodically published based on the hexagon, have undoubtedly contributed to the popularisation of the city brand issue and its importance in the process of shaping the competitive advantage of cities (Kuczera, 2014).

When professionalising management, cities use tools developed for business needs in management science. An example is the Szczecin Floating Garden 2050 brand management strategy, which is integral to the city development strategy. Similarly to companies, cities, or more broadly places, are trying to build their strong territorial brands (Florek, 2014), which, as A.C. Middleton (2011) points out, are regarded as one of their more critical assets and, moreover, the brand is both a lens through which information is viewed and a decision criterion. Branding or marketing of cities has become an essential strategy to attract capital, mobile professionals or tourists (Escudero-Gómez, 2024).

The key elements of branding are brand identity and brand image. The brand identity reflects the image desired by the brand owner. It is shaped within the organisation. It represents an attempt to distinguish itself through a set of characteristics (location, assets, monuments, inhabitants) and activities (events, happenings) communicated to the public. The branding of a city, created by its decision-makers, is a modern version of communication in which one communicates the attractive features of one's identity to current and potential stakeholders identified as crucial to the success of a place (Ma, Schraven, de Bruijne, de Jong, and Lu, 2019; Ma, de Jong, de Bruijne, and Mu, 2021).

The recipient's perception of the communicated identity creates the image (Kapferer, 2008). It is a mental reflection of reality, a highly subjective set of associations and emotions. This means that the same characteristics will represent different values for different audiences. Moreover, the way of perception is the motivating factor to take action, not the city in the physical sense (Gallarza *et al.*, 2002).

A brand, then, is not a message (a broadcast) but the context in which that broadcast was received (Anholt, 2005). It is a set of mental, memory or emotional relationships between it and its recipient. Therefore, regardless of the urban sub-products identified in the management process, one of the ultimate products of a city is its image (Glińska *et al.*, 2009). An example of successful efforts in this area can be found in the Danish town of Horsens, which has changed its image over the past two decades from being commonly associated as a prison city to being widely perceived as a city of concerts and events (Jørgensen and Hannibal, 2023).

In the above context, place-makers should emphasise branding and identifying image perception. This should influence the desired image (Hajduk, 2017) and the proper positioning of the city (Poon, 2024). The significant number of activities undertaken in this area by researchers confirms the relevance of such activities in managing and seeking competitive opportunities (Stylidis *et al.*, 2017).

4. Research Methodology

In the context of the issues highlighted, the authors conducted a study on the image of the city of Szczecin. It is one of not the largest but significant urban and academic centres in Poland. It is strongly influenced by larger cities, which results, among other things, in the loss of current and potential highly qualified staff.

There is a noticeable migration of young people to stronger centres, with a better, in their eyes, image to study, and university graduates looking for an attractive place to pursue a career. At the same time, Szczecin attracts students and graduates from other regions to a small extent. The academic nature of the city proves to be an asset here, which drives development and creates a positive image. Still, it is insufficient to gain a competitive advantage compared with cities with stronger brands.

Naturally, the survey's target group is management students, who can be seen as critical future decision-makers who will influence the shaping and development of the space in which they operate. It is worth mentioning that two of the four strategic objectives included in the Szczecin Development Strategy (2011) relate precisely to activities based on highly competent human capital.

These objectives are (objective 2) Szczecin - a city of modern, competitive and innovative economy and (objective 3) Szczecin - a city with high intellectual capital.

Thus, the arbitrary choice of students as a target group aligns with the priorities in the city's development strategy where the research was carried out.

It should be noted that students are characterised by a high degree of mobility accompanied by a significant number of external interactions, both present and future. They are, therefore, an essential carrier of information about the city (Gębarowski and Glińska, 2010).

These assumptions locate the research within a stakeholder perspective (Duque Oliva *et al.*, 2022). The objective adopted is cognitive and applied. The study used a survey questionnaire tool, the design of which was primarily inspired by a publication by M. Gębarowski and E. Glińska (2010). The technique used was CAWI, which PAPI replaced in individual cases (technical difficulties). Respondents were management students of all years of full-time study, both first- and second-cycle, at the Faculty of Economics, Finance and Management at the

University of Szczecin. 147 completed questionnaires were obtained out of 340 students.

5. Research Results and Discussion

The primary data obtained were analysed in different contexts and using various approaches. Due to the volume limitations of individual publications, interpretations will be presented in several articles. This one is devoted to a comparative analysis of Szczecin's current image and the image revealed a decade ago in the previous survey⁴. Data from 2013 and 2023 will be compared.

This study may provide an answer to the broader question of whether Szczecin has been well managed in recent years in terms of attracting highly qualified staff - students and university graduates. Moreover, the survey also looked at graduates' plans for where to pursue their careers. However, these data will be published in a follow-up article.

Respondents began the survey questionnaire with a question that took the form of a semantic differential. Along with the Likert-type scale, this is one of the two most frequently used composite scales in structured research of this type and is even referred to as the “always-charged battery” of attitude researchers due to its versatility and ease of use (Mangal and Mangal, 2013).

Combining qualitative associative insights and scaling allows the identification of attitude structure and the intensity of its components. Its construction uses a bipolar adjectival opposition, with each pair of antonyms delineating a polar pattern of attitude analysis. It should be noted that some representatives of the quantitative community believe that this method uses an ordinal scale and thus precludes the possibility of averaging the data obtained with it. They point to the need to use positional statistics.

Other interpretations start from the assumption that the middle value of the scale, the neutral value, is an arbitrary zero point, while the intervals between the individual responses of the scale can be treated as equal, allowing it to be viewed as an interval scale. This opens the way to using the arithmetic mean and accompanying classical measures.

This treatment seems particularly popular in sociological research, including the study of attitudes, the analysis of stereotypes, and the visualisation of the resulting profiles (Brzezińska, Brzeziński, 2021). In the present study, each of the 13 pairs of antonyms was accompanied by a scale of 3, 2, 1, 0, 1, 2, 3. Respondents indicated which of Szczecin's expressions were closer to them and how intensely they

⁴The results from the previous edition can be found in the publications: (Kuczera, 2014, 2015).

identified with them. For the calculations, the indications on the left of the neutral value, relating to the positive perception of the image components, were coded as negative numbers.

The average values for each pair of antonyms obtained in both the 2013 and 2023 surveys and a breakdown of the results by gender are presented in Table 1. To enhance readability, the values from 2023 are aligned to the left of the cell, and the value from 2013, as a reference, is aligned to the right and written in italics. In addition, the average values for the whole population from both survey editions are visualised in Figure 1, where the linguistic labels of the individual pairs of antonyms are also presented.

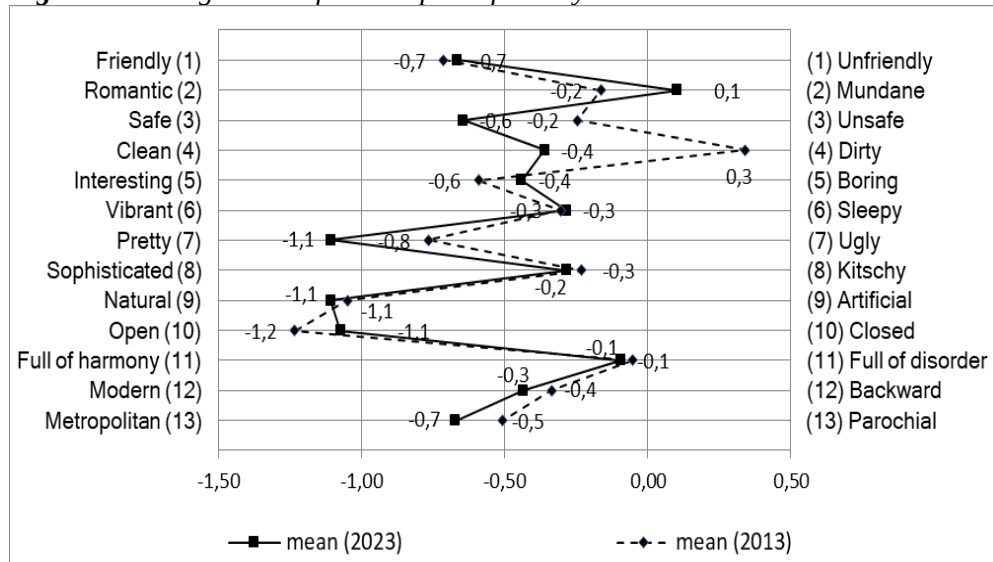
Table 1. Mean values for individual pairs of antonyms

Measure:	Pairs:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Mean	Total	-0,67	0,10	-0,65	-0,36	-0,44	-0,29	-1,11	-0,29	-1,11	-1,07	-0,10	-0,44	-0,67
		<i>-0,71</i>	<i>-0,16</i>	<i>-0,25</i>	<i>0,34</i>	<i>-0,59</i>	<i>-0,31</i>	<i>-0,77</i>	<i>-0,23</i>	<i>-1,05</i>	<i>-1,24</i>	<i>-0,05</i>	<i>-0,34</i>	<i>-0,51</i>
	Women	-0,61	0,28	-0,54	-0,24	-0,40	-0,20	-1,00	-0,10	-1,06	-0,98	0,05	-0,36	-0,68
		<i>-0,68</i>	<i>-0,10</i>	<i>-0,24</i>	<i>0,34</i>	<i>-0,59</i>	<i>-0,27</i>	<i>-0,73</i>	<i>-0,24</i>	<i>-0,99</i>	<i>-1,21</i>	<i>-0,07</i>	<i>-0,43</i>	<i>-0,53</i>
	Men	-0,73	-0,10	-0,78	-0,51	-0,49	-0,39	-1,24	-0,51	-1,16	-1,19	-0,27	-0,52	-0,67
		<i>-0,79</i>	<i>-0,32</i>	<i>-0,27</i>	<i>0,35</i>	<i>-0,59</i>	<i>-0,39</i>	<i>-0,85</i>	<i>-0,21</i>	<i>-1,19</i>	<i>-1,29</i>	<i>-0,01</i>	<i>-0,11</i>	<i>-0,47</i>

Note: Data from 2023 - aligned to the left side of the cell, data from 2013 aligned to the right side of the cell and italicised.

Source: Authors' calculations.

Figure 1. Average values for each pair of antonyms



Source: Authors' calculations.

It should be noted that all components of the image except for individual situations are perceived positively. In 2013, the average negative perception of Szczecin was revealed only in the pair (4) – clean vs dirty. The city was considered dirty, which is not the case in the current edition of the survey. At the same time, this is the pair with the most significant change, by 0.70 (from 0.34 to -0.36).

These values oscillate around neutral 0, meaning that neither was particularly bad nor is it particularly good, although the direction of change should be encouraging. The improvement in the city's cleanliness is more strongly perceived by men ($n=67$) (0.85) than by women ($n=80$) (0.58), who perhaps have higher expectations or less tolerance for shortcomings in this area.

The second pair of antonyms where there has been the most remarkable change, also for the better (by 0.40), is pair (3) – safe vs. unsafe, with, again, a more significant improvement of image for men (0.51) than for women (0.30).

The situation is analogous for the next pair in terms of improving the image of the city—the change of 0.34 concerns the pair (7) – pretty vs ugly. At the same time, this pair, *ex aequo* with pair (9) – natural vs artificial, achieved the highest positive score in 2023, slightly ahead of pair (10) – open vs closed. The pair (7) also showed stronger image improvement for men (0.39) than for women (0.27). Perhaps also, in the case of aesthetics, it is more challenging to make positive impressions on the ladies.

Another image component with a distinctive strength of change is the pair (2) – romantic vs mundane. Here, however, the direction of change is reversed, with mean ratings being worse (by -0.27), influenced more strongly by women's impressions (-0.38) than men's (-0.22). Moreover, this is the only aspect of the image that recorded a negative image in 2023 – the mean ratings ranked slightly to the right of the neutral value.

So, while men perceive changes in cleanliness, safety, and aesthetics more intensely, women react more strongly to the city's progressive loss of romance and its mundanity. For the other indications, the average changes in perception of the city over the last decade were noticeably smaller.

Noteworthy, however, are three pairs of antonyms in which a clear gap in the direction of image change between men and women is revealed. In all cases, men perceive an improvement, while women signal a deterioration. This mechanism applies to pairs: (8) – sophisticated vs kitschy, women decrease by 0.14, men increase by 0.29, summative improvement of 0.05, (11) – full of harmony vs full of disorder, women decrease by 0.07, men increase by 0.26, summative improvement of 0.04, (12) – modern vs backward, women decrease by 0.07, men increase by 0.42, summative improvement of 0.10.

The synthetic overall assessment, understood as the mean of all indications, reached a slightly better value (closer to positive terms) in 2023 (-0.54) compared to 2013 (-0.45), which may indicate a slight improvement in the overall image of Szczecin in the eyes of students. Although the signalled sub-scores clearly indicate a varied pattern of change.

Also noteworthy is the fact that in 2023, in all pairs except the last one, a better image assessment was revealed by men. In contrast, in pair (13) the values are equal. In 2013, only in 7 aspects men perceived Szczecin better than women - (1), (2), (3), (6), (7), (9) and (10). So, does Szczecin meet men's needs better, or are they less critical of their perceptions?

There is a common opinion in Szczecin that visitors perceive it better than residents. About this, it was checked whether the assessments of people originating from Szczecin (n=65) differed significantly from those of respondents who declared that they came from outside the city (n=71). In most cases, the results were very similar. Noteworthy was the pair (3) – safe vs unsafe. Szczecin residents feel safer in their city (-0.98) than visitors (-0.39).

Analysis of the source data does not suggest which groups of people, in terms of origin, may feel more or less safe, e.g., people from larger or smaller towns or guests from beyond the eastern border, whose stay is considered in a specific context.

The second pair with a clear difference in perception is the antonyms (6) – vibrant vs sleepy. This time, the higher rating is given by visitors (-0.61) compared to people from Szczecin (-0.08). It is worth noting that the visitors in our survey are dominated by people from smaller towns and rural areas. Szczecin is unlikely to attract young people from larger cities or voivodship capitals to study.

Thus, while the inhabitants of Szczecin feel somewhat bored with their city, visitors find activities that strengthen their perception of the city in this area. This situation can be confirmed by the pair (5) – interesting vs boring. Here, too, a better image appears in the view of visitors (-0.54) than in the eyes of Szczecinians (-0.29), although the difference is not so significant.

Taking into account the voices of a part of the community interpreting the semantic differential as a question based on an ordinal scale, and thus the necessity to use positional statistics in the data analysis, reference was also made to them.

Table 2 presents selected positional measures of the ratings distribution from the current and previous survey editions while also considering the breakdown by gender. Analogous to Table 1, values from 2023 are aligned to the left of the cell, and values from 2013 are aligned to the right and written in italics.

Table 2. Positional statistics of the ratings distribution

Measure:	Pairs:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Quartile deviation	Total	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,50	1,50	1,50	1,00	0,50	0,50	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
		<i>1,00</i>	<i>1,00</i>	<i>1,25</i>	<i>1,50</i>	<i>1,50</i>	<i>1,25</i>	<i>1,00</i>	<i>0,50</i>	<i>1,00</i>	<i>0,50</i>	<i>1,00</i>	<i>1,00</i>	<i>0,75</i>
	Women	1,00	1,00	0,50	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	0,50	0,50	1,00	1,00	0,63	1,00
		<i>1,00</i>	<i>1,50</i>	<i>1,50</i>	<i>2,00</i>	<i>1,50</i>	<i>1,50</i>	<i>1,00</i>	<i>1,00</i>	<i>1,00</i>	<i>0,50</i>	<i>1,00</i>	<i>0,63</i>	<i>1,00</i>
	Men	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,50	1,50	1,50	1,00	0,50	0,75	1,00	0,50	1,50	1,00
		<i>1,00</i>	<i>1,00</i>	<i>1,50</i>	<i>1,50</i>	<i>1,25</i>	<i>1,50</i>	<i>1,00</i>	<i>1,00</i>	<i>0,75</i>	<i>0,50</i>	<i>1,00</i>	<i>1,00</i>	<i>0,50</i>
Asymmetry coefficient	Total	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,33	0,33	-0,33	0,00	-1,00	-1,00	0,00	0,00	1,00	0,00
		<i>0,00</i>	<i>0,00</i>	<i>0,60</i>	<i>0,33</i>	<i>0,33</i>	<i>0,60</i>	<i>0,00</i>	<i>-1,00</i>	<i>0,00</i>	<i>-1,00</i>	<i>0,00</i>	<i>1,00</i>	<i>0,33</i>
	Women	0,00	0,00	1,00	0,00	1,00	0,00	0,00	-1,00	-1,00	0,00	0,00	-0,60	0,00
		<i>0,00</i>	<i>0,00</i>	<i>0,67</i>	<i>0,25</i>	<i>0,33</i>	<i>0,67</i>	<i>0,00</i>	<i>-0,50</i>	<i>0,00</i>	<i>-1,00</i>	<i>0,00</i>	<i>0,80</i>	<i>0,00</i>
	Men	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,33	0,33	0,33	0,00	-1,00	-0,33	0,00	-1,00	0,33	0,00
		<i>0,00</i>	<i>0,00</i>	<i>0,33</i>	<i>-0,33</i>	<i>0,20</i>	<i>0,33</i>	<i>0,00</i>	<i>0,00</i>	<i>-0,33</i>	<i>-1,00</i>	<i>0,00</i>	<i>0,00</i>	<i>1,00</i>
Excess coefficient	Total	0,33	0,25	0,29	0,38	0,30	0,38	0,25	0,21	0,13	0,25	0,25	0,33	0,33
		<i>0,25</i>	<i>0,25</i>	<i>0,31</i>	<i>0,30</i>	<i>0,38</i>	<i>0,31</i>	<i>0,25</i>	<i>0,17</i>	<i>0,33</i>	<i>0,14</i>	<i>0,25</i>	<i>0,25</i>	<i>0,25</i>
	Women	0,33	0,25	0,17	0,25	0,25	0,25	0,25	0,17	0,33	0,25	0,21	0,33	0,33
		<i>0,32</i>	<i>0,25</i>	<i>0,25</i>	<i>0,30</i>	<i>0,38</i>	<i>0,25</i>	<i>0,25</i>	<i>0,24</i>	<i>0,33</i>	<i>0,13</i>	<i>0,25</i>	<i>0,13</i>	<i>0,33</i>
	Men	0,29	0,25	0,25	0,30	0,30	0,28	0,25	0,17	0,22	0,25	0,17	0,50	0,33
		<i>0,20</i>	<i>0,25</i>	<i>0,38</i>	<i>0,33</i>	<i>0,25</i>	<i>0,38</i>	<i>0,20</i>	<i>0,33</i>	<i>0,25</i>	<i>0,17</i>	<i>0,28</i>	<i>0,25</i>	<i>0,14</i>

Note: Data from 2023 - aligned to the left side of the cell, data from 2013 aligned to the right side of the cell and italicised.

Source: Authors' calculations.

Attention is caught by pairs (8) and (9), which are characterised by the smallest quartile deviation (0.50), both in the total assessment, the assessment by women and the assessment by men in pair (8). In the case of pair (9), the men's assessment took on a value of 0.75. At the same time, the asymmetry coefficient (of skewness) indicates a strong negative asymmetry, while the excess coefficient (kurtosis) indicates a slender⁵ shape of the assessment distribution.

Respondents are, therefore, similar in their opinions and, taking the mean value into account, rather critical. At the same time, one can observe here a tendency towards a greater concentration of answers in relation to the results from a decade ago, the opposite of pair (10), where all three deviations now have greater values than 10 years ago with a symmetrical distribution. Thus, the image of Szczecin's openness is weakening (mean -1.2 → -1.1), particularly firmly in women's eyes (-1.21 → -0.98), with respondents' answers being more widely distributed on the scale simultaneously.

⁵ It is assumed to treat distributions with positional excess coefficient values below 0.263 as slender (pointed and higher vertex) and above this value as flattened (lower and flatter vertex).

Pairs (4), (5) and (6) are characterised by the largest quartile deviation (1.5) indicating significant dispersion of responses. They are slightly asymmetric with a slender shape in the total assessment. In all these pairs, men's evaluations are more diverse and, on average, better (more strongly positive) than women's evaluations.

On the other hand, women's ratings are more homogeneous than in 2013. Over the last decade, these aspects of the image have been more clearly established in the perception of the ladies. Notably, in 2013, the highest quartile deviation value (2) was recorded just among women in the pair (4) - clean-dirty. At the time, the ladies were hesitant; today, they agree that the city is dirty.

The quartile deviation also indicates that men's ratings are more often more dispersed, pairs (3), (4), (5), (6), (9) and (12), than women's ratings, pair (11). Interestingly, this is the reverse of the situation in 2013, when in 5 cases, a higher deviation value was recorded for women and in only one case for men. It is interesting to note that pairs (1), (2), (7) and (11), for which almost all analysed parameters took the same values as 10 years ago, so views in the surveyed collective are similarly dispersed. Although looking at the average values in the graph, especially of pairs (2) and (7), they oscillate around a slightly different perception of these aspects of the image than during the previous edition of the survey.

The most significant difference in quartile deviation between men and women was revealed in pair (12), clearly indicating a greater variation in ratings among men. At the same time, the mean value of the ratings among women (-0.36) was less positive than among men (-0.52); thus, taking into account the mean and the deviation, the ladies are more consistently indicating a low level of modernity in Szczecin than the men, who, although on average, rate the city as more modern, the ratings here are more widely scattered on the scale, some perceiving a lot of modernity, others a lot less.

The positional asymmetry coefficient, which in the case of the analysed pair amounted to (-0.60) for women, shows a moderate negative skewness of the distribution (accumulation of marks being closer to the neutral value of the scale), with a small flattening value (0.21) confirming the low entropy of marks. In the case of men, there was a weaker positive asymmetry (0.33) and a significantly stronger flattening of the distribution (0.50), the strongest of all cases.

It is worth mentioning that the slight average improvement (-0.34 → -0.44) in the image of the city as modern in the last decade consists of a better perception among men (-0.11 → -0.52) and a worse one among women (-0.43 → -0.36) than 10 years ago.

The asymmetry of the distribution, which stands out for its strength, is also visible among women in pairs (3) and (5) – positive skewness and (8) and (9) – negative skewness, as well as in pairs (8) and (11) among men.

All these cases are accompanied by kurtosis values indicating a slender ratings distribution. These are, therefore, image components perceived in a somewhat similar way.

6. Conclusions

The presented comparative analysis of the primary data obtained in the surveys generally revealed a slight improvement in the image of Szczecin as perceived by management students over the last decade. The overall average value of all image aspects surveyed is closer to the positive terms in the pairs of antonyms used in the semantic differential. The terms with which respondents most identified were pretty, natural and open.

For the first of these, there was a marked improvement in perception, the second a slight improvement, and the third a noticeable deterioration from the results of 10 years ago. The only negatively rated component of the image was the mundanity of Szczecin, with the previous survey indicating a slightly romanticised character of the city.

The most remarkable changes with positive resonance in the image of the city are seen in its cleanliness, followed by safety and the perception of the city as a pretty rather than an ugly city.

Conclusions from the aggregated data show a rather simplistic picture of reality, so it is worth noting the differences in the perception of the image in the eyes of men and women, as emphasised in the body of the study. Men react more positively to changes in the city's cleanliness, safety and aesthetics, while women signal more strongly the progressive loss of the city's romanticism and its mundanity.

Positional statistics enriched the discussion. They made it possible to distinguish those image dimensions which are perceived rather similarly by individual respondents, as well as those where the diversity of assessments is significant, both among the entire surveyed population and the groups distinguished by gender. The greatest concentration of evaluations (most minor quartile deviation) was revealed in the case of the antonyms (8) – sophisticated vs kitschy and (9) – natural vs artificial.

Here, too, there was relatively little change from the survey 10 years ago, both in terms of the average ratings and their dispersion on the scale. The most significant variation in respondents' ratings (largest quartile deviation), i.e. the least consistent perception of the image, was recorded in pairs (4) – clean vs dirty, (5) – interesting vs boring and (6) – vibrant vs sleepy.

The presented results and directions of their interpretation may become a voice in the discussion on the current image of Szczecin, the use of the past decade for its building or possible changes in the strategy and directions of activities in the area of

city brand management, which is integrated with the strategy of Szczecin's development until 2025.

The research undertaken was accompanied by the assumption that cities function in competitive conditions and that highly qualified staff is a vital and desirable resource of strategic importance for which there is competition. This follows directly from the city's development strategy, including the strategic and directional objectives.

Hence, management students - future decision-makers - were purposely chosen as the research group. It seems that the proposed action should also be implemented concerning other groups of respondents, especially those fulfilling the strategic objectives of city development.

This would be an exciting addition to knowledge in the area undertaken. The amount of collected empirical material does not allow for its comprehensive presentation within the framework of a single paper, hence further research questions will be discussed in subsequent articles, where attention will be focused, among other things, on the relation between the image of Szczecin and the degree to which needs in various areas are satisfied and the intention to stay or leave the city after graduation. This will, to a large extent, answer the question of whether the city's administrators effectively attract and retain the human resources they indicate as strategic for the city's development.

The discussion confirms the subjective, latent and unstable nature of the image and the different reactions to the reality found by individual respondents, as signalled in the introduction to this paper. It may also suggest areas for further research to identify young people's expectations and reactions to the city's offer, as well as further directions for managing this offer.

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