
The Image of a Large City in the Opinion of Foreigners: The Case of Szczecin, Poland

Submitted 10/09/24, 1st revision 25/09/24, 2nd revision 01/10/24, accepted 15/10/24

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Abstract:

Purpose: An attractive image of a place, e.g. a city, can become of such a unique value that it will allow a decision to stay longer, which, in relation to the chosen place, should be considered a success.

Design/Methodology/Approach: It is worth emphasizing the complexity of understanding image attractiveness (residential attractiveness, investment attractiveness, recreational attractiveness, etc.) through the prism of not only existing residents, but also the differentiated cultural baggage of newcomers and the specific conditions of the place.

Findings: In this light, the survey conducted on the image of Szczecin among foreigners taking into account three aspects of the place (city), as a place of residence, tourist and recreational attractiveness and business potential.

Practical Implications: According to the survey, Szczecin is perceived positively as a place to live, work and tourism, but there are areas for improvement, such as availability of services, infrastructure and support for migrants.

Originality/Value: This study offers an originality contribution by analyzing the image of Szczecin from the perspective of foreigners, considering its multifaceted attractiveness as a place to live, work, and visit. By highlighting both strengths and areas for improvement, the research provides valuable insights for city planners, policymakers, and stakeholders seeking to enhance the city's appeal and competitiveness in an increasingly globalized environment.

Keywords: City, image, Szczecin, foreigners.

JEL codes: M31, O18, R23.

Paper type: Research article.

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1. Introduction

The progressive uncertainty of the environment with underlying social, political, economic and environmental messages causes many people to decide to leave their current place of residence and migrate, often across national and even continental borders. It is not always of a permanent nature, and the place originally chosen is final. Thus, it can be said that for various, sometimes intertwined reasons, an increasing number of people are becoming modern nomads.

An attractive image of a place, e.g. a city, can become such a unique value that it allows people to decide to stay longer, which in relation to the chosen place should be considered a success. However, it is worth emphasizing the complexity of understanding the attractiveness of the image (residential attractiveness, investment attractiveness, recreational attractiveness, etc.) through the prism of not only existing residents, but also the differentiated cultural baggage of newcomers and the specific conditions of the place (*differentia specifica*), (Glinska, Florek, and Kowalewska, 2009; Grzyś, 2017). The image of a place in the consciousness of an individual user is shaped by cognition in the broadest sense, i.e. knowledge about the place, which allows us to identify its uniqueness, and this contributes to the decision to revisit and sometimes to stay in the place.

However, cognition is subjective in nature, which is due to the intellectual, cultural, social resources of the individual, as well as the quality and objectivity of the origin of information sources. The second component shaping the image of a place is valuing, which can be considered at the level of evaluation and emotions related to perceptions, subjective impressions, sometimes prejudices and even fears about places Richards and Wilson (2004).

The dynamics of the interaction of the two aforementioned groups of elements shaping the overall image of a place, which, moreover, enter into complex relationships with each other, means that the desired image of a place, even one that arises spontaneously and rapidly, requires a sufficiently long-time horizon, and its stability is relative (Daszkiewicz 2009; Dudek-Mańkowska, 2011). Looking through the eye of an “outsider,” that is, not a resident, but even more so a foreigner, allows us to see what, because of our aesthetics, history, or cultural background, may be completely overlooked. This different perspective can, in turn, be the premise for exploiting gaps in the promotion of places and, as a result, their development. It is worth noting, however, that perceptions of places can be influenced by the circumstances of first visits.

This includes the socio-demographic characteristics of the visitors themselves such as age, education, gender, life experience, previous mobility, but also the motive or context of the visit, i.e. voluntary or forced, accidental or planned, related to a specific intention such as work, study, treatment, shopping, residence (Gajda, 2013; Kaczarek, 2013).

As one of the largest Polish cities (about 400,000 inhabitants), we can consider Szczecin to be special in terms of its location, since it is the only one in the country that forms a cross-border metropolitan area with the adjacent area, theoretically entering the territory of Germany with its spatial scope.

However, this arrangement, due to the national border, is still handicapped. Besides, Szczecin is a peripheral city with a complex difficult history, where previous cultural ties were broken after 1945. Szczecin is a port city, a major academic center, and in recent years has also been an attractive local labor market for migrants from many countries, which obviously affects the number of foreigners coming in. All this prompts the question of the image of Szczecin in the opinion of foreigners, which at the same time we can consider as the purpose of the work.

Figure 1. Administrative location of Szczecin compared to Poland



Source: <http://ppcc.pl/informacje-o-polsce/>.

2. Materials and Methods

To achieve the intended research goal, a survey method was used. The survey was conducted in May and June 2022 in Szczecin. The questionnaires were addressed to foreigners, but to increase objectivity in assessing the image of the city, the focus was only on foreigners with a registration. The number of foreigners meeting this condition was 6,529 people, or 1.66% of the total population of Szczecin. The subject scope of the survey concerned foreigners of different nationalities, with different socioeconomic statuses, with different educational backgrounds, and with different lengths of residence in Poland.

The survey took the form of direct field research, also using the snowball method. After verification, 315 questionnaires were qualified for further study, which, considering the sample size ($N=6529$ people), estimation ($e=0.05$), confidence level

($\alpha=0.95$) and fraction size of 0.7 and finally $n=307$ seems appropriate. Thus, the results obtained met the condition of representativeness.

The survey consisted of 23 questions. The first part of the survey consisted of a metric with questions regarding the respondent's nationality, place of origin, gender, age, length of stay in Poland and purpose of arrival in Szczecin (6 questions). In addition to the metric, the research questionnaire consisted of three parts to address specific issues.

The first part focused on the attractiveness of Szczecin as a place to live (6 questions), the second on what kind of place is attractive for tourism and recreation (6 questions), and the third allowed for the study of Szczecin as a labor market and business creation (5 questions). Az 11 questions from the main part are open-ended questions, which caused several problems due to the reluctance of respondents to speak at length, which affected the length of the research conducted.

The responses received were coded using a codebook, and then subjected to statistical analysis in an Excel spreadsheet, based essentially on a structural indicator, which is defined as the ratio of a part of a statistical community to the whole community.

3. Results

The questionnaire was completed by 315 respondents of various origins and nationalities. The Ukrainian nationality was declared by the most numerous (32.1%) of the respondents, followed by Belarusian (11.7%) and German (11.1%). It is interesting to note that the next most numerous groups of respondents was Italian nationality (6.3%). It is worth noting that the results obtained are consistent with the structure of foreigners in Szczecin as reported by the City Hall and are a result of Szczecin's location and the current socio-political situation in Eastern Europe.

Most of the foreigners surveyed (48%) were from large cities (over 100,000 residents), more than a third of respondents were from medium and small cities, and only 17% were from rural areas. The largest group of respondents, more than 55%, were people of younger working age (26-45), which seems to confirm the fact about the increased mobility of this age group. A relatively large group were young people of school and college age (24%). The rest of the respondents declared ages falling within the ranges of 46-60 (older working age) and over 60 (post-working age). The latter were only 17 people (5.4% of respondents). In the metric section, respondents were also asked to specify the length of their stay in Poland. As many as 47% of survey participants responded that they had been in Poland for less than a year. The overwhelming majority were Ukrainians.

In contrast, only 10.5%, i.e., 33 people, declared that they had lived in Szczecin for more than 10 years. Which may be important in assessing possible changes taking

place in the city. In terms of gender, most respondents are women (52.4%). It is worth noting that in the case of migration from Eastern Europe, the predominance of women is significant, while the opposite is true for respondents coming from countries such as the Philippines or Turkey.

The most common reason for coming to Szczecin was work-related and accounted for 35.5% of all responses (113 people). However, slightly fewer responses were received resulting from forced migration from Ukraine (28.8%). This means that before the outbreak of war in Ukraine, Ukrainians in Szczecin accounted for a small percentage of migrants (just over 3%). Another of the reasons for the arrival of foreigners in Szczecin were family ties (about 16% of all responses) and education (about 14%). The remaining responses were considered other including, for example, good living conditions.

After creating a profile of the respondents, the three specific problems mentioned earlier were analyzed. The first was an attempt to answer the question about the image of Szczecin as a place to live. The most important results from this part of the survey include the following:

1. Less than 82% of the total respondents (258 votes) consider Szczecin an attractive city to live in. In this group, the most common argument was aesthetics, visuals and nature of the city (63.9%) and acceptable living conditions (12.8%). This hides such elements as, for example, the cost of living, especially compared to the respondent's country of origin. An important element appreciated by 8.1% of respondents is the peace and security that Szczecin provides. This is especially important in times full of political and economic turmoil and uncertainty, especially in the context of starting or operating a family. Another 7% of respondents cited as an answer the human factor identified with the qualities of the local community human friendliness, willingness to help, and a kind attitude towards another person. This is an element that is particularly important for a foreigner living far from his or her native country, family or friends. A surprisingly large number of surveys (6.2%) lacked justification for the positive attractiveness of the city mentioned.
2. When asked about the material items they miss from their country of origin, one in three respondents said they do not miss such items. In contrast, one in four mentioned basic foodstuffs. Of the intangible elements, lack of such elements was also the most frequently obtained response, with a share of 35.9% of the total responses. Slightly more than 25% of responses had reference to family and friends. Significantly, this was also the most important reason for a possible move from Szczecin, including a return to the home country. For respondents declaring Ukrainian nationality, the percentage was 57%. This, in turn, illustrates the acculturation rate of

migrants, especially those who arrived after the start of the Ukraine-Russia war.

3. The longing for close family and social ties, which is the most important reason for the migration of foreigners from Szczecin (25.1%), is not the only one. Surprisingly high were unfavorable weather conditions (10.2%) and unfavorable labor market conditions (9.5%).

In summary, among respondents, Szczecin has a good reputation as a place to live. The appreciated elements are nature, safety and tranquility that the city provides. However, as the survey shows, these are not elements that replace proximity to family or loved ones. The analysis of the questions also shows that although there are tangible and intangible elements that may be lacking, some of them foreigners are able to adopt from local resources.

However, there are elements that cannot be replaced, such as, for example, the unique climate of a place or even the weather. It is these elements that were among those most important to the interviewees. Another issue worth mentioning is the political situation currently taking place across the Polish border. A person changing his place of residence for work will look at the issues differently, as will one fleeing the war.

The second specific problem concerned Szczecin in the context of tourist and recreational attractiveness. The following themes can be distinguished in this detail problem:

1. Most respondents (81%) considered Szczecin as a city attractive for tourism and recreation. As a justification, the most frequent answers were given to the entertainment and cultural offer of Szczecin (56.2% of all indications). They referred, for example, to the wide range of offers that the city provides in terms of leisure activities, entertainment provided and cultural offers. Respondents also appreciated the visual and aesthetic qualities of the city, which accounted for more than 30% of all responses. As an aside, it can be mentioned that this aspect, which is often overlooked or underestimated among Polish residents, was appreciated. The remaining 19% of the total number of respondents considered that although the tourist and recreational offer of Szczecin is wide, it is not quantitatively accessible enough. Much of the offer has low accessibility, e.g. the Philharmonic Hall. It is also worth mentioning that the language barrier may not be insignificant, as many cultural events are only in Polish.
2. Among the postulated changes that could be introduced to increase the tourist and recreational attractiveness of the city, respondents indicate precisely the availability of cultural events, including the realization of at least some of them in foreign languages. This is the opinion of one in three

respondents. Of the proposed languages, Ukrainian, German and English appear most often. In addition, 23% of respondents suggest expanding the opening hours of restaurants, bars, and, to a much lesser extent, tourist information centers or souvenir places. Suggestions made by respondents regarding, for example, viewpoints and night tours of the city, as well as the illumination of some recreational spots (such as the so-called “cloud” gyms and potential running trails) can be considered niche.

3. The positive opinion of Szczecin in the context of tourism and recreation also translates into the fact that as many as 81% of respondents would recommend Szczecin as a tourist destination to other visitors. According to the respondents, the main reason they would recommend Szczecin is the wide range of tourist and recreational activities one can experience in the city. They accounted for 27% of all respondents. Another element that respondents appreciated is the visual aspects of the city. 6% of respondents appreciated the city's character and it is for this reason that they would recommend it to other visitors.
4. When asked about barriers to enjoying the city's tourist and recreational attractions, traffic congestion was highlighted (44% of responses), followed by extensive street repairs (40%) and the quality and punctuality of public transportation (just under 5%).

The above findings confirm that Szczecin as a city has a lot to offer in terms of tourism and recreation, and it is a city with potential that is perhaps overlooked by those of Polish origin living there. The analysis shows that the foreigners surveyed are satisfied with the tourist and recreational offer that the city can offer today, however, elements that could possibly be improved were also indicated.

The third specific problem is the image of Szczecin in the business context. In this aspect, the following results were highlighted:

1. More than 63% of respondents considered Szczecin to be an attractive place in terms of business and career. Profitability and business viability compared to the country of origin were cited as the main reason behind such elements as, for example, the cost of doing business, but also the much greater clarity of regulations and the absence of at least overt corruption.
2. Respondents also appreciated the city's development potential (65% of responses), which translates into business opportunities. There were frequent responses and direct comments about gaps, for example, in services, which are already filled in other large Polish cities.
3. On the other hand, bureaucratic barriers were most often mentioned among the responses supporting the city's unattractiveness of business. They accounted for 22% of all responses. Among the others were the language barrier and the breadth and flexibility of job opportunities. The language

barrier was noticeable in the responses. This was stated by one in five respondents. A question was posed about business and professional support for foreigners. In this case, 91% of respondents did not find support in this regard. It is worth mentioning that the survey did not ask about financial support, but about support in finding a job and starting or developing one's business. Only 6.2% of respondents confirmed this support. Most of the remaining respondents chose not to answer this question (83%) or found other forms of support not mentioned above.

In summary, it can be concluded that the local labor market and local business is open to accepting new participants in the market game, giving them opportunities and possibilities, however, due to such elements as, for example, the language barrier or complicated bureaucracy foreigners living in Szczecin are not able to take full advantage of what the city offers in this context. One can risk a statement that the city does not have sufficient tools with which to support foreign residents in the context of finding a job or establishing a business. This reflects negatively on its image, even though the city has great development potential.

When answering the main research problem concerning the image of Szczecin through the prism of its residential, tourist-recreational and investment (business) attractiveness, one can assume that it is positive. Despite visible shortcomings and deficiencies, Szczecin appears as a city of the so-called "second chance", where many Poles and foreigners can start the next stage of their lives.

4. Discussion

In the past few years, we have witnessed a rapid development of territorial marketing in Poland. New opportunities for development and promotion are opening up for many regions and cities (Kordek and Worobjow, 2015). Szczecin is no exception in this regard, as a long-term city brand management strategy has also been developed for this city. According to the information found on the website of the Public Information Bulletin of the City Hall in Szczecin, the main objective of the strategy programs is to strengthen the position of Szczecin as a metropolitan cross-border urban center, capable of competing with regions such as Øresund.

The city authorities also emphasize that the programs implement the constitutional principle of sustainable development. In addition to this key aspect, the strategy is based on principles such as partnership, social participation, equal opportunities, and territorial cohesion.

However, in order to achieve the set goals, it is necessary to apply appropriate promotional and management tools. These tools should not only effectively support the creation of Szczecin's image but also meet the needs of all residents, including foreigners. Although the city has much to offer both Poles and foreigners, it faces the challenge of maintaining and developing its transnational image.

Szczecin is changing on many levels. People, the city's physiognomy, and trends in urban life are all undergoing transformation. Each of these factors influences the overall image of the city, which, in the eyes of foreigners, is shaped by many different aspects. It is worth analyzing these factors to better understand what elements influence the assessment of Szczecin and what actions could contribute to its further development.

Szczecin is undoubtedly a city with immense potential. Its geopolitical location is one of its greatest assets. The proximity of the Baltic Sea, the border with Germany, and access to the Pomeranian Wall make Szczecin strategically important both for Poland and for Europe. This is especially significant in the context of trade, transport, and tourism. The city has a chance to become an important logistics hub and an attractive travel destination for people from abroad.

However, this potential is not always fully utilized. A key problem faced by Szczecin is its infrastructural backwardness. Although many investments have been made in recent years, such as road modernization, revitalization of public spaces, and the development of public transport, the city still faces challenges in this area. Incomplete road infrastructure and ongoing construction work may contribute to a negative perception of the city, especially among tourists and newly arrived residents.

The perception of cities by foreigners depends on many factors, such as their culture, experiences, stereotypes, or interactions with local residents. Although Szczecin is not yet as popular as Kraków or Wrocław, it is gaining importance in the opinion of foreign residents and tourists. One of the key factors influencing the assessment of the city is its tourist attractions. Szczecin offers many attractions, such as Wały Chrobrego, the Pomeranian Dukes' Castle, and the Mieczysław Karłowicz Philharmonic, which has become a symbol of the city's modernity. Tourists also highlight the charm of the city's parks and the proximity of the Oder River, which gives Szczecin a unique character.

Equally important is the atmosphere of the city. Foreigners often point out that Szczecin has a friendly and open aura. The city is perceived as calm and safe, which particularly distinguishes it from other European metropolises. The level of crime in city centers is low, which is confirmed by studies and residents' opinions.

The quality of urban infrastructure is another crucial element of Szczecin's image. In recent years, investments have been made in the development of roads, public transport, and housing construction. While the effects of these investments are already visible, such as in better public transportation and the revitalization of selected districts, many areas still require improvement. Foreigners often point out the lack of coherence in spatial planning or the difficulties caused by construction work.

The cost of living in Szczecin is another factor that positively influences the city's image. Compared to many other European cities, the cost of living here is lower, which attracts not only tourists but also foreign workers. Szczecin offers competitive rental prices, dining options, and access to services, making it an attractive place to live for foreigners. However, it is worth considering whether Szczecin may have a problem with maintaining a good image. A key challenge is the lack of a clear and precise message addressed to foreigners. Szczecin should clearly communicate how important foreigners are to the local community and what benefits come from their integration.

The conducted research points to certain issues that need to be addressed promptly. The lack of adequate programs supporting the adaptation of foreigners may lead to their alienation and an increase in negative stereotypes. To avoid this, Szczecin should invest in initiatives that promote cultural integration and intercultural dialogue. Szczecin has enormous potential to become a model for other cities in terms of creating a positive image. Its strengths, such as its location, tourist attractiveness, and safety, provide a solid foundation for building the city's brand. However, success depends on the effective implementation of the strategy, openness to change, and care for the needs of all residents, including foreigners. These actions will allow Szczecin not only to maintain its image but also to contribute to its further development as a cross-border metropolitan center.

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