
Use of Green and Water Areas in the Process of City Image Creation on the Example of Szczecin

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Abstract:

Purpose: The purpose of the study is to identify the importance of green and water areas among other factors creating the image of a city, such as Szczecin. The image of a city can be an element creating its competitive advantage over similar units, which in the long term results in certain economic and social benefits. Contemporary trends emphasizing sustainable development promote units indicating that such solutions are important to them. Emphasizing the use of natural elements in the process of shaping the image of a city can contribute to its perception as modern and moving in the direction of sustainable development.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The study used the CAWI method, and the survey was a pilot study. The questionnaire (containing 19 questions) was posted online, and the sampling was random. The questionnaire was properly completed by 125 people. The subject of the study was the broadly defined image of Szczecin present in the respondents' consciousness, their awareness of and opinion on the factors determining the image of the city.

Findings: the survey showed that in the opinion of respondents, the image of Szczecin is formed by green and water areas (81.6%), but architectural elements (Chrobry Embankment, Philharmonic Hall) are most associated with the image of the city, while green and water areas received only 15.2%. Additional responses mentioned the football club Pogoń Szczecin, but also elements of green areas such as crocuses, plane trees and Jasne Blonia. Only 22.4% of respondents believe that the city's greatest assets are well used, while almost twice as many hold the opposite view. However, green areas and the city's riverside location are cited among the city's well-used assets, while the city's history and local traditions are among the poorly used ones. Green areas and water areas represent great potential for image creation in Szczecin, and respondents consider it necessary to build a brand based on local culture (urban legends, regional dishes) (39.5%) and to run campaigns emphasizing the city's natural assets (greenery, water areas) (38.7%), which underlines the importance of this aspect for the city's image.

Practical Implications: The results of the study can provide important material for local authorities responsible for creating the city's image. Placing more emphasis on the dissemination and promotion of the city's image based on natural elements can further contribute to deepening the vision of a modern and nature-friendly city.

Originality/Value: The use of green and water areas in cities is a relatively new area of research, especially in the context of image formation. Most often, green and water areas are

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seen as factors that significantly affect the quality of life of residents or the basis for creating tourist attractions. Their use in the context of building a competitive advantage through the image of an environmentally friendly and sustainable city is rarely found in the literature.

Keywords: *City image, green and water areas in cities, competitive advantage.*

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1. Introduction

The competitiveness of modern cities is linked to many different aspects of their functioning. One of the key elements is the image of the city, which is usually based on carefully selected attributes of the city, such as modern architecture, historical events or organized events.

Contemporary ideas of city development focus on their sustainable development, designed to ensure a balance between the natural, social and economic systems, creating XXQ cities (with the highest possible quality of life for residents).

An increasingly important role is played by natural elements, which perform a variety of functions in urbanized organisms, including aesthetics, recreational, health promotion or sheltering. They include such elements as parks, greens, promenades, boulevards, botanical, zoological, Jordanian and historic gardens and cemeteries, as well as greenery accompanying streets, squares, historic fortifications, buildings, landfills, airports and railroad and industrial facilities.

Urban greenery is an important element in public space, has a positive impact on the image of the place where people live and their health, shapes urban aesthetics and minimizes the nuisance of urban life. It is increasingly recognized that it is crucial to properly connect green areas so that they can form a green infrastructure, which increases their positive impact on the quality of life in the city (Ojaghlou *et al.*, 2023; Kadlubek *et al.*, 2022).

This topic has been addressed by Lucchi and Buda (2022) and Schindler, Le Textier and Caruso (2022), among others. Parallel to the above-mentioned functions, green areas and water areas can form the basis of promotional activities carried out by local governments in the context of shaping its positive image.

The purpose of the study is to identify the importance of green and water areas among other factors creating the image of the city, using the example of the city of Szczecin.

2. Literature Review

In recent years, the topic of the image of cities has been increasingly addressed in research (Carmona, 2021; Badami, 2022; Suardi, 2023), including in the context of the use of green spaces in their construction (Garcia-Lamarca, 2021). Consideration of the possibilities of image creation should begin by answering the question of what image actually is.

This is not the easiest task, since over the years other, closely related terms have also been created. Their area of meaning remains in close relation to the concept of image, and partly overlaps with it. In particular, the concept of brand should be singled out here.

According to J. Altkorn's definition, "a brand is a name, a symbol, an inscription, a design, or a combination of these (...) used to distinguish a product from competing products" (Szromnik, 2016). A well-constructed brand remains in the consciousness of the recipient, encouraging him to make continuous purchases and maintaining a high level of emotional satisfaction because of it (Rosa, Smalec, and Gracz, 2010).

The image is a consequence of the perception of the brand by target groups, a reflection of the values represented by the brand from the consciousness of potential stakeholders. From this approach comes the definition of image as a perception of the brand.

Summarizing a review of the definitions of image in the literature, it can be noted that this concept, depending on the approach, can include:

- the image of the object, contained in the minds of the audience,
- a reflection of the actual state of affairs in the mental awareness of the environment,
- the associations evoked in the audience by a given object,
- an image or vision of an object formed in the viewer's consciousness based on experiences with the object (Szromnik, 2016).

The concept of image, thus reassumed, can nowadays also be applied to territorial units, including cities. The definition of the image of a spatial-administrative unit created by Ph. Kotler and his colleagues defines it as the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that people relate to a place (Kotler, Haider, and Rein, 1993).

Shaping a good image of a city is a complex process that requires the cooperation of numerous interested groups. In order for the image creation process to be effective,

it must be carried out in an organized manner. A. Łuczak distinguishes six stages of this process:

- 1) Baseline analysis, including measures to determine the current image of the city.
- 2) Objectives for the desired image, a stage that includes defining the target ideal image of the city and determining the actions to be taken to achieve it.
- 3) Segmentation of addressees of the city's image. Such segmentation allows you to precisely tailor your activities to selected addressees.
- 4) Positioning the city's image, i.e. planning how to position the image in the minds of addressees.
- 5) Selection of marketing instruments of image creation - image promotion.
- 6) Image measurement and control.

Achieving a competitive advantage over similar entities (cities) means tangible benefits in the form of, among other things, an increased number of tourists, a better position in attracting potential investors, or higher income. However, competing entities (including cities) often use very similar tools, resulting in duplication of solutions and ideas resulting in functional, spatial and compositional unification of cities.

Thus, it becomes necessary to find (or create) new planes of competition, which will allow to preserve the individual character of the city allowing its easy identification. One such plane is the city's natural assets, including green areas (including forests) and water areas.

3. Methodology

Quantitative studies make it possible to determine such characteristics of a phenomenon as its extent, intensity or direction, as well as the relationships that occur between phenomena. They are quantifiable and statistical repeatable surveys, generating data that can be analyzed with statistical tools.

Due to the nature of the survey and its purpose, the most suitable method for conducting the survey was the CAWI method, allowing a large number of responses to be collected in a short period of time at the convenience of respondents. The survey questionnaire was used to gauge the opinions of residents and tourists, which allowed for collection of data on diverse perspectives on the perception of the image of Szczecin.

The subject of the study was the broad image of Szczecin present in the minds of the respondents, their awareness of and opinion on the factors determining the image of the city. The survey had a pilot character, preceding a full-scale study of the image of the city of Szczecin, in a wide range of aspects. To conduct the survey, a 19-question questionnaire (diagnostic survey) was constructed and posted on the

Internet. The respondents were selected on the basis of convenience sampling, so the sample selection was random.

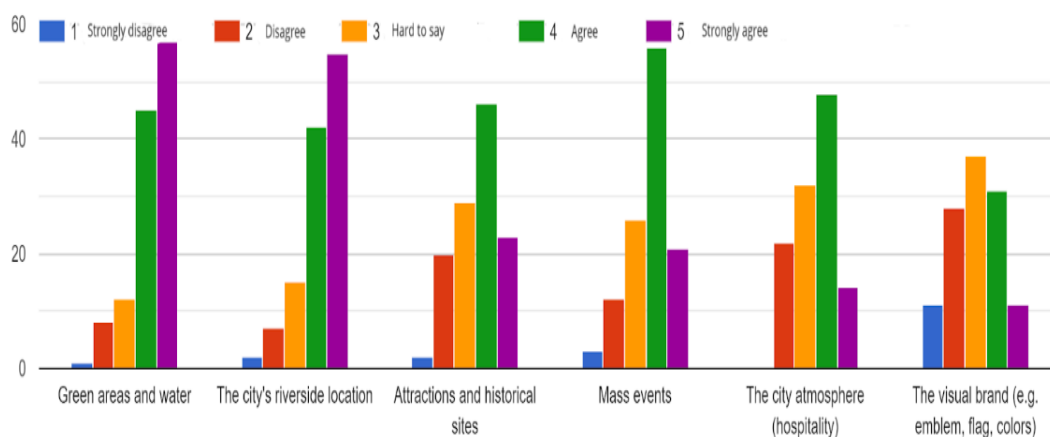
The questionnaire was completed correctly by 125 people, of whom 77.6% were women, 20.8% were men, and two respondents (1.6%) answered "I do not identify with my biological sex." The age of respondents varied quite a bit; the largest number of respondents (31.2%) were 26-35 years old, and there was a relatively high proportion of respondents aged 18-25 (21.6%) and 36-45 (19.2%).

The vast majority of respondents were residents of Szczecin (82.4%), while the rest were mainly residents of neighboring municipalities and the West Pomeranian Voivodeship.

4. Results

The results of the pilot study clearly indicate that, according to respondents, the image of Szczecin is definitively created by green areas and water (a total of 81.6% answered "definitely yes" or "rather yes"). The respondents' opinion on the influence of the city's location on the river on its image was similar (a total of 77.6% of positive responses). The atmosphere (hospitality) of the city, as well as the attractions and monuments were also positively assessed (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Elements that create the image of Szczecin according to the respondents

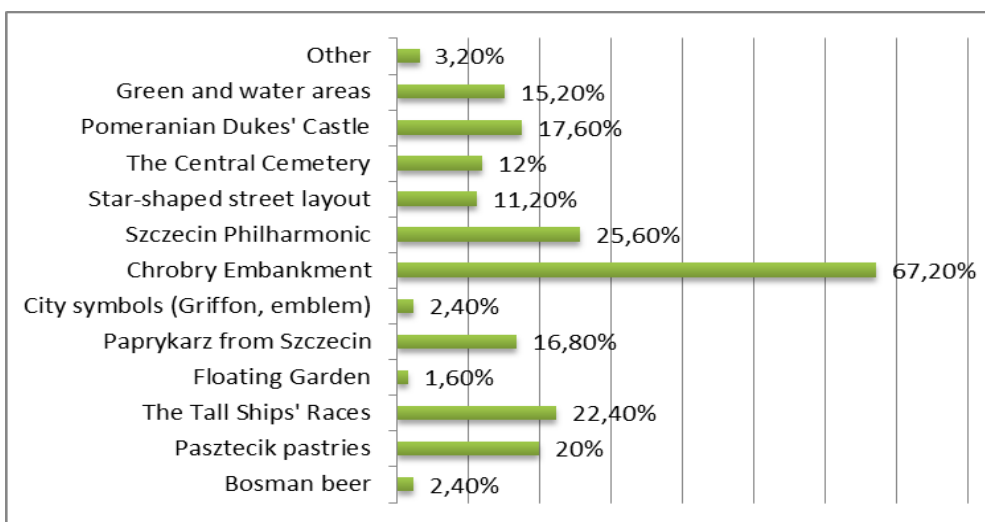


Source: Own elaboration.

However, when it came to determining what is most associated by respondents with the image of Szczecin (although green areas and water were mentioned more often among the elements of Szczecin's image), green areas and water received only 15.2% of responses, while architectural elements (the Chrobry Embankment (67.2%) and the Philharmonic Hall (25.6%)) were chosen the most times. In third place was the largest mass event organized by the city, The Tall Ships' Races (22.4%).

The least frequent choices were the Floating Garden (1.6%), Bosman beer (2.4%) and the city's symbols (2.4%), illustrating the lack of a strong visual brand for the city. Also mentioned among other responses were Pogoń Szczecin and elements of green areas - crocuses, plane trees and Jasne Błonia (Figure 2).

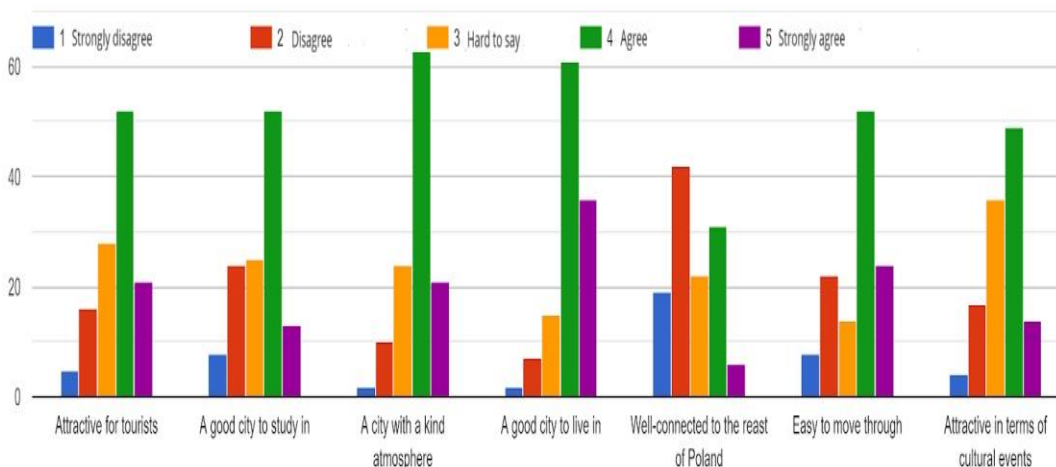
Figure 2. Elements related to the image of Szczecin in the opinion of respondents



Source: Own elaboration.

In the next part of the survey, respondents were asked to rate whether positive statements about Szczecin were true in their opinion (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Qualities of the city of Szczecin according to respondents



Source: Own elaboration.

The most positively rated statements were that Szczecin is a city where one lives well and a city with a kind atmosphere (77.6% and 67.2% of positive responses, respectively). Szczecin's connectivity to the rest of Poland was rated the worst, while the ease of getting around Szczecin was rated well by 60.8% of respondents.

The attractiveness of Szczecin for tourists was positively assessed by 58.4% of respondents. Among respondents from outside Szczecin, 59.1% gave a positive answer, which would indicate a favorable opinion of potential tourists about Szczecin.

Among the assets of Szczecin used well, according to respondents, the most frequently mentioned were green areas, the city's location on the river (including for the organization of mass events with a maritime theme and in the open air), the city's proximity to other well-known European cities, architecture, and Szczecin's reviving boulevards.

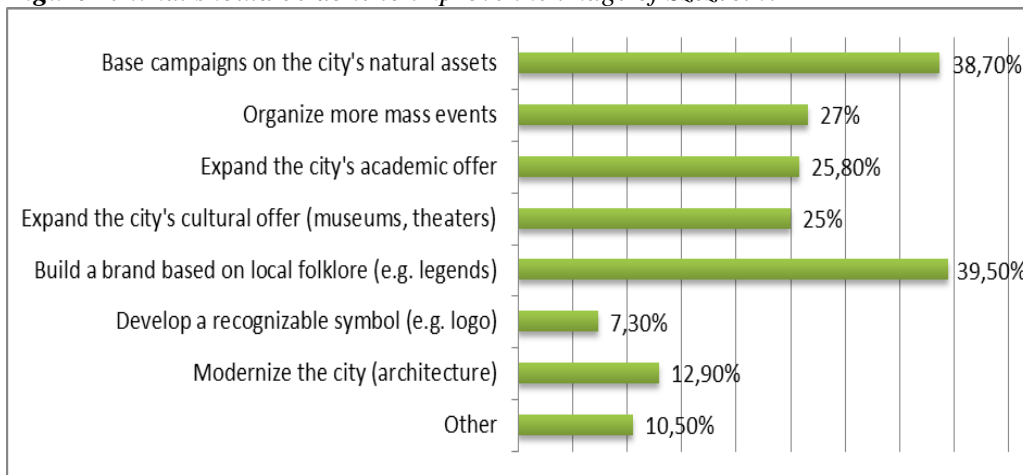
On the other hand, according to the respondents, poor use is made of the city's history and local traditions, the city center (including the Old Town), which is not a good space for residents, the potential of green and water areas for active tourism, the city's location close to Germany and Scandinavia, and Łasztownia, where not enough mass events are organized.

According to respondents, the architecture in the city center should be renovated, the water-related sports offer should be expanded, more events ought to be organized at Łasztownia, the presence of Szczecin on the map of Europe should be emphasized, and the city's history (maritime traditions, the idea of a port city) should be used to build its image.

According to respondents, among the actions that should be taken to improve the city's image, the most frequently selected answers were to *build a brand based on local culture (urban legends, regional dishes)* (39.5%) and to *conduct campaigns highlighting the city's natural assets (greenery, water areas)* (38.7%), which emphasizes the importance of this aspect for the city's image in the respondents' minds (Figure 4).

In third place was the answer to *organize more mass events* (26.6%). From the most frequent responses, it can be concluded that according to respondents, the best strategy would be to build Szczecin's image around local traditions and foods, as well as the city's natural assets, such as green areas, complementing it with interesting mass events (Figure 4).

Figure 4. What should be done to improve the image of Szczecin?



Source: Own elaboration.

5. Discussion

Szczecin is a city located in northwestern Poland in the estuarial area of the Oder River. The city has a diverse spectrum of tourist values, among which anthropogenic (cultural) values are usually considered the most important, among which the following can be considered unique: Chrobry Embankment (1902-1906), Pionier cinema 1909 - the oldest operating cinema in the world in the same place, EUREKA - exhibition of interactive experiences in Szczecin, Castle of Pomeranian Dukes (14th century), star-shaped layout of squares and streets (the city on the plan of Paris), underground Szczecin, Szczecin Philharmonic. In addition, Szczecin has assets of a similar nature to other cities, including: remnants of fortification fortifications, residences, sacred objects, monuments, fountains or museum facilities.

The organization of events is also considered a tourist attraction, of which Szczecin hosts cyclical events such as Sail Szczecin and the Grand Tournament of Tenors. Of great importance for the attractiveness of the city is the final of The Tall Ships' Races, which has been held in Szczecin three times (2007, 2013, 2017), and is planned once again in 2024.

Szczecin is a spatially extensive city (more than 300 km²), with a diverse natural environment, in which water and green areas have a large share. The city is located within the Szczecin Hills (max 147 mnpm), while the main element determining its structure and functions remains its location in the estuary area of the Oder River, which divides the city into three main parts.

More than one-fifth of the city's vast surface area (more than 300 km²) is occupied by green areas of varying nature. The area of urban greenery in Szczecin, with recreational, representative, ecological and technical functions, is more than 530

hectares, including parks, cemeteries, greens, street greenery, allotment gardens and forest areas. Water areas, many among which are unique, account for about $\frac{1}{4}$ of the city's area, including Lake Dąbie, the Oder River with the Międzyodrze River, numerous watercourses and lakes located within the city. Both water areas and green areas, are mostly used for recreation of residents and as an attractive background for other activities.

The prevalence of green and water areas in the city's space was one of the key factors that prompted efforts to create the *Szczecin Floating Garden 2050* brand. The brand creators' assumption was that the city's image should be based on the conceptualization of gardens, which is why the brand is largely based on natural elements.

The Visual Identification System of Szczecin played a key role in the promotional strategy in question. Special attention was paid to adjusting its colors and shapes so that they were associated with greenery, water and space. In 2008, a campaign logo was presented that reflects these assumptions (Figure 5).

Figure 5. The logo of the long-term "Szczecin Floating Garden 2050" project



Source: <https://www.szczecin.eu/pl/marka-floating-garden>

The Visual Identification System has been applied to street signs in Szczecin, the appearance of buses and streetcars, house numbers, public transportation stop markings or signposts. However, surveys conducted show that the image based on the Floating Garden brand is not recognizable, which may suggest that it is not promoted enough. Measures should be taken to increase the city's brand recognition as a "floating garden" and improve the link between the city's image and natural assets in the minds of the public.

6. Conclusions

The created brand of the city of Szczecin Floating Garden 2050 uses a large share of green and water areas in the city's area in its idea, slogan and colors. However, the survey showed that the architectural elements of the city are most associated with the image of the city, despite the fact that (in the opinion of respondents) the image of Szczecin is formed mainly by natural elements.

Among the other elements that make up Szczecin's image, green and water areas have great potential, but it is necessary to conduct a promotional campaign emphasizing the natural qualities of the city (greenery, water areas). Placing more emphasis on dissemination and promotion of the city's image, based on natural elements, can additionally contribute to deepening the vision of Szczecin as a modern and environmentally friendly city.

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