

IMPERMANENCE OF THE VISUAL IDENTITY OF POLISH LOCAL AND REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS

Anna Adamus-Matuszynska¹, Piotr Dzik²

¹University of Economics, Katowice, Poland, adamus@ue.katowice.pl, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3234-4599>

²Academy of Fine Arts, Katowice, Poland, piotr.dzik@asp.katowice.pl, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4154-4955>

Received 28 March 2024; accepted 18 October 2024

Abstract

Research purpose. The literature on place branding lacks long-term and quantitative studies on the rebranding of territorial brands. Place branding consultants recommend that they should be reviewed and refreshed approximately every decade. However, it is emphasised that rebranding is demanding for the territorial organisation, and a place brand change should be undertaken in a methodical manner. Therefore, the objective of the study is to compare this process with the theoretical postulates summarised in the literature on the subject.

Design / Methodology / Approach. The research method used was visual content analysis. The collected data were verified by individual interviews with representatives of local governments. The authors have been conducting a research project on Polish local and regional governments since 2011. Therefore, it is possible to summarise the changes, modifications, and rebranding of Polish territorial brands in the period 2011-2023. The queries were conducted regularly in the years 2011-2024 (the end date was the day of local government elections in Poland on April 7, 2024).

Findings. More than 250 logos have been withdrawn or replaced, and approximately 100 have never been implemented. Research confirmed that the number of changes is large (more than 30% of logos have been replaced by new ones), but it is difficult to determine one or even the dominant cause of such serious organisational changes.

Originality / Value / Practical implications. A review of the literature allows us to draw a conclusion about the lack of long-term research on the functioning and changes of the content of logos practised by places. Therefore, a 10-year study on the population of all local government units in Poland provides data that supports the development of territorial branding theory and allows analytical support for territorial rebranding processes. The research discussed is significant because it reveals, first, the frequency of changes and, second, the difficulty in defining the causes of these changes.

Keywords: place brand; rebranding; longitudinal research; visual communication.

JEL codes: B40, M30, H70, Z18.

Introduction

Nowadays, cities, regions, and countries communicate with their surroundings in a way previously developed by business organisations. Marketing and branding are also typical activities for territorial entities that, in order to attract tourists, retain residents, or invite investors, undertake activities typical of business for many years. Today, marketing and branding are independent disciplines of applied sciences with their own research methods, theories, and conclusions from empirical research. The aim of the article is to present, through the analysis of visual signs used in place branding in Poland, the issue of rebranding territorial brands. The literature on place branding lacks long-term and quantitative studies on the rebranding of territorial brands. Place branding consultants recommend that they should be reviewed and refreshed approximately every decade (Conradsen, 2022; Olins, 2009; Silber, 2023), the literature on the subject points out, that this cycle may be disrupted by unexpected shocks, such as

the COVID epidemic (Ayozie, 2020). However, it is emphasised that rebranding is a demanding process for territorial organisation due to the continuity of the place identity (Ujang, 2017; Wang, 2016), public funds needed for that process and tradition, which plays a special role for community, that is why, a place brand change should be undertaken in a methodical manner (Mroz-Gorgon, 2019; Stasiuk & Maison, 2014; Wheeler & Meyerson 2024). Therefore, the objective of the study is to compare this process with the theoretical postulates summarised in the literature on the subject.

The starting thesis of the presented research is the comment of Claude Raffestin (Raffestin, 2012): “Representations are like currency: they are subject to inflation and progressively lose their value. In other words, some tend to take it that reality is represented in a less and less adequate manner” (p. 125). Taking the above thesis as a starting point, the authors hypothesized that the logo and visual identification systems do not meet these expectations. To verify such a hypothesis the authors started building the database in 2011 (Dzik, 2011). The catalogue was systematically updated during its duration, regular reviews were carried out at least once a quarter. Since the research project on visual identities of Polish self-government units has been conducted by the authors for approximately 12 years, it is possible to summarise changes, modifications, and rebranding of Polish territorial brands in the period 2011-2024 and make comparison of these processes with theoretical postulates contained in the literature on the subject 2024 (the end date was the day of local government elections in Poland on April 7, 2024) and attempt to verify the general hypothesis.

According to the concept of Per Mollerup, the brand can be analysed as three concentric circles that encompass the following elements (Mollerup, 2013, p. 46):

1. core, i.e., what is subject to the branding process, and the core in the case of place branding is a place with its characteristics (*genius loci*),
2. presentation, which in the author’s understanding mainly means visual identification,
3. the image of the brand in the recipients’ awareness.

When comparing the above descriptions with the Anna Giza brand concept, the following triggers for rebranding can be identified (Giza, 2017, p. 167):

1. Changes in the core (the place itself), caused by social, political, or economic changes (e.g. collapse of some industry or administration changes) and the resulting objective need to change the way of brand presentation.
2. Changes in the structure and product offer of the city/municipality/region resulting from strategic decisions, as happened in Bilbao and is now called the 'Bilbao effect'. In this city, several comprehensive changes were carried out, including a decaying industrial district revitalisation, the monuments of the old town were taken care of, the urban transport system (two metro lines) was initiated and finally building The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, among others. These changes in the architecture and socioeconomic structure of the city played an essential role in the crafting of a new image of Bilbao and a new Bilbao brand emerged (Lucas, 2023).
3. Significant technical problems in the practised identification system, such as errors, omissions, and structural issues related to the brand architecture (Wheeler & Meyerson, 2024), which are so essential that they require the creation of a new visual identification system.
4. Disturbances resulting from differences between current visual presentation and cultural changes. Mollerup underlines in his requirements for a logo that fulfils its functions (Mollerup, 2013): “14. Fashionability. Is the trademark fashionable? Sometimes, a trademark should be fashionable, even if that means that it may eventually become unfashionable” (p.93). If trends in culture change, the logo may become obsolete and also require a change. This is the argument used by the Warsaw authorities in Poland when they changed the identification (the logo) in 2023.
5. And finally, difficulties in relations with recipients. If research or other factors, e.g. an image crisis, indicates that the identification has unfavourable associations for the brand, the visual identification should be exchanged or updated. Research shows that the scandal encompassing the logo of the place is not a common phenomenon, which does not mean that individual cases can be ignored due to the social resonance of the rumour, the application of the law, and the skilful management of the media crisis

(Adamus-Matuszynska & Dzik, 2019). For example, in 2022 the authorities of Cologne removed the reference to the cathedral from its logo, which caused much controversy and negative comments among residents and other recipients. The city was accused of denying its cultural heritage (Nijenhuis, 2022).

Bearing in mind five factors that may determine a change in the identification system mentioned above, the following hypotheses should be formulated:

1. Any changes in the political, social, and economic systems influence the local government's decision to change the visual representation of the unit.
2. Changes in infrastructure, architecture, or other elements that create the identity of a place influence the change of visual identity.
3. Every weakness of the visual identity noticed or mentioned by experts or/and citizens/tourists influences the decision to change it.
4. Cultural trends and new ideas in art, as well as fashion, are factors influencing decisions on changes in the visual identity of local government units.
5. Both scientific and marketing research revealing the weaknesses of visual identity influence the decisions of local government authorities to change the visual identity.

Considering the theoretical assumptions and 12 years of research on the content of territorial logos in Poland, the following research questions were asked:

1. How often do territorial units rebrand their place brand in Poland?
2. What are the reasons for making the decision to rebrand the place's visual identification?
3. How is this process carried out and how is it communicated?

The answers to these questions were formulated based on the analysis of changes in the content of the logos of the Polish territorial units.

Literature Review

In research and analyses dedicated to creating and changing the brand of companies and products, it is emphasised that the rebranding process takes place when it is necessary to strengthen the brand on the market or improve operational performance (Miller et al., 2014). Merrilees and Miller (2008) define corporate rebranding as “the change between an initially formulated corporate brand and a new formulation” (p. 538). This definition is so ambiguous that it may evoke many associations with terms such as brand repositioning, makeover, renewal, refreshment, and reinvention (Miller et al., 2014). Moreover, the rebranding literature often accepts a phenomenon-driven approach, with few studies found to have adopted no theoretical bases (Miller et al., 2014). Image and reputation can also be perceived as drivers that influence an organisation to rebrand itself. The model of the rebranding process by Muzellec and Lambkin (2006) outlines the drivers and objectives of rebranding within companies. The model brings together possible causes for rebranding, such as changes in ownership, changes in corporate strategy, changes in the external environment, and changes in competitive position. Mroz-Gorgon and Haenlein (2021) summarise the state of research stressing that there are few publications and studies in the literature that describe and explain the effects of rebranding strategies. In the same way that large companies sometimes overhaul or completely replace their images and relaunch themselves as fresh corporate brands, some cities try to establish completely new brand identities (Bennett & Savani, 2003).

An extended literature review done by Miller et al. (2014) proves that all place rebranding cases have a proactive trigger. They suggest that this proactive trigger is “an identified opportunity to enhance the brand which drives the rebranding initiative” (Miller et al., 2014, p. 270). Ashworth et al. (2015) mention that an increase in mobility of people forces cities to compete and to ensure sustainability and economic development. In the same context, Boisen et al. (2011) support that the increase in city branding campaigns leads to a greater awareness of perceived competition among cities. Additionally, place rebranding strategies often focus on regenerating cities or locales, such as in the case of New York, the city's reputation was rebuilt in the ‘I love NY’ campaign carried out in the 1970s (Eskilson, 2012), with the aim of transforming the place into a brand. A review of databases (Google Scholar and EBSCO)

using the query ‘place/territory/city rebranding’ showed that there are only a few dozen such articles and that they are mainly single case studies or theoretical analyses of the co-creation process (Hakala et al., 2020). Therefore, the authors assume that, in the literature on the subject, the notions of place branding and rebranding concepts overlapped. Due to the above, a problem arises with the operational definition of rebranding, i.e. what activities are rebranding and what are not. The authors, following Stuart (2003), assumed that rebranding includes a change of the logo and slogan. The author also points to a name change, but in the case of place branding in Poland, this is extremely rare. In the research period only, the West Pomeranian Voivodeship changed its marketing name to “Western Pomerania”, gave up its previous slogan and changed its previous logo (Rsocko, 2023).

Research Methodology

Visual content analysis was used as a research method to examine the content of the logos of the examined places. It was chosen to learn about changes in icons, signs, and images contained in the logo content over the years. This tool allows us not only to learn about the content of the logo but also to make comparisons between the signs used by a particular territorial unit. It is a method that is practised in both qualitative and quantitative research. Its inventor, Berelson (1952), defined the method as the objective, systematic, and qualitative description of the content disclosed in the communication. This method is a valid research scheme for place branding (Byrom et al., 2007; Govers & Go, 2009; Hashim, 2017). The content analysis of the graphic symbols used in the promotion consists of the following four stages (Rose, 2016):

1. Finding images: Logos of self-government units were found on official websites, social networks, and other promotional publications. The researchers also contacted officials for interviews, especially when there were doubts about the meaning of the content.
2. Developing categories for coding: Coding means attaching a set of descriptive labels (or categories) to the images.
3. Coding the images: Applying distinguished categories to places’ logos.
4. Analysing the results: Formulating conclusions and discussion of the questions.

Using a qualitative thematic coding methodology, a categorical framework was created for the classification of the logos studied. A content analysis approach was applied to examine and assess the images used in the logos collected from the local and regional government units in Poland.

Over the course of 12 years, the authors analysed the visual identification systems of all local and regional government units in Poland, of which there are 2,873 in total. During the presented research, 1350 logos were found, and content was analysed in terms of motifs and themes. They have been those that have been being practically used and that have been withdrawn, never implemented, as well as those cases that had not been clearly classified.

Research Results

The process of collecting logos of Polish territorial units began in 2011. During these 12 years, 1350 logos were collected, changes were noticed and divided into the following types:

- a. Officially not implemented logo (ONI). These are situations in which it was possible to confirm that the authorities had conducted a public competition or other procedure (e.g. public procurement) to select appropriate for the unit logo, identification system, promotion strategy, or other document containing a visual identification proposal. The queries were made on official websites, public information bulletins, local government newspapers, and by contacting relevant offices. These were situations where the entity's authorities chose a logo, but no action was taken to implement the visual logo into the entity’s marketing practice.
- b. Logo without official confirmation (LWC). These are situations where the information was found in another source than official local regional sources. For example, information about the logo appeared on the websites of the media (especially local media), on the websites of

consulting companies, and branding agencies; however, the local authorities themselves did not officially inform recipients about the adoption of the logo.

- c. **Unclassified logo (UL).** This is a situation in which it was not possible to confirm whether the logo was used in marketing activities and to what extent. This group mainly includes logos that were identified for the period before 2011 and those that appeared on the websites of institutions or private persons not related to local government units. Procedures and information came from other than official sources, and the creation of the logo could not be confirmed in any way (e.g. competitions organised by public institutions were interrupted at the stage of selection).
- d. **Withdrawn logos (WL).** The following reasons led to recognise that the logo was withdrawn:
 - The logo was withdrawn by an official act of law.
 - Media statements (interviews, testimonials, comments, etc.) prepared and published by local administration representatives informing about the withdrawal of the logo.
 - Due to the conclusive connection between place branding and political processes (Mabillard et al., 2024), a logo was considered withdrawn if it was not used after 2018. This period was assumed due to the last term of the local government office in Poland (2018-2024).
- e. **Replaced logo (RL).** This is a group of logos that have been replaced by new signs or have been subject to such far-reaching modification that it is observable by recipients who do not have professional training in graphic design (e.g. Krakow).

The number of logo changes made in the years 2011 - 2024 in local and regional government units in Poland, divided into voivodeships, is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Logo changes in 2011-2024 (Source: Created by the authors)

Voivodeship	ONI	LWC	UL	WL	RL
	number of logos	number of logos	number of logos	number of logos	number of logos
Lower Silesia	5	0	7	17	5
Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship	3	0	5	5	2
Lubelskie	4	0	3	8	2
Lubuskie	2	0	2	4	3
Lodz Province	0	1	3	11	5
Lesser Poland	2	2	8	11	5
Masovian Voivodeship	0	3	12	23	8
Opole Voivodeship	0	0	2	4	4
Podkarpackie	2	2	4	4	1
Podlasie	2	1	2	4	2
Pomeranian Voivodeship	2	1	4	5	2
Silesian	3	3	7	22	8
Swietokrzyskie	1	1	1	3	3
Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship	4	2	4	4	3
Greater Poland	2	4	7	17	7
West Pomeranian	3	1	7	12	6
Sum	35	21	78	154	66

Of the 1350 visual signs recognised during the investigation as logos of local and regional government units, 354 were changed within 12 years for the reasons mentioned above. This means that the content of these signs has been changed to show other iconic elements of the places they symbolise. In total, there are 354 changes and additional situations that are difficult to clearly assess, that is, over 35% of

local government units with territorial logos have changed the content of these signs over the last 12 years. It can also be analysed from the perspective of all units in Poland. There are 2873 territorial units in Poland, so 12% of them changed their logo during the analysed period.

To sum up, it should be emphasised that over a period of 12 years, every tenth commune in Poland decided to change the content of the logo. The research results show that the durability of this content is not long. Therefore, questions arise about the reasons why these changes are taking place. One of them are the recommendations of researchers who underline that the content should be adapted to the present. Other studies emphasise that political, cultural, and social changes taking place both in the place to which the logo applies, as well as in its closer and further surroundings, influence decisions to change the logo. To learn about the conditions of these changes, it is necessary to study each case separately, because each city, village, or district has its history, iconic places, symbols, and historical and cultural heritage.

Conclusions

The number of logos changed is relatively large, but it is difficult to clearly identify the causes of these changes. Logos commissioned by local government authorities are sometimes not implemented or rejected without explaining the reasons, making it difficult to know the direct causes.

One of the most respected branding practitioners and theorists on branding and rebranding processes expressed the opinion that (Olins, 2009) “Branding changes are not ordered on a whim. There is always a good reason for them. However, he also adds that this important reason may be [...] a new CEO who wants to make a good start...” (p. 57). On the other hand, in the literature on place branding, it is difficult to find scientific studies indicating what the logo life cycle should be. There are many incidental variables that influence the durability/changeability of a brand.

There is no clear answer to the question of how many years a logo should be practised because it depends on many factors, such as marketing strategies, changes in consumer preferences, market competition, innovations and many others (Garbarski & Krzyzanowska, 2023). However, a large number of unimplemented, withdrawn and changed logos of the Polish LGU between 2011 and 2024 remain unexplained. Taking into account the postulate contained in the study cited by Olins (2009) that visual identification should be verified every 8-10 years, the changes described above can be considered strategically justified.

The literature on branding indicates that the visual identification of brands loses value over time - the brand image weakens (Klint et al., 2014): “The brand image held by consumers can reach a point where a business or product has to rebrand itself or risk not bringing in sales” (p. 2). Three groups of reasons can be identified for this situation: strategic, design, and (operational). Strategic reasons concern rebranding (Mroz-Gorgon, 2019) and are proposed to revitalise the brand, as well as influence its life cycle (Witek-Hajduk, 2010). Design reasons are related to fashion or popular trends. As Mollerup (2013) underlines, a sign designed to be fashionable inevitably ceases to be so after some time. The poor graphic quality of the signs, which the authors confirmed during the consultation work, was the reason for changing the logo of the Mazowieckie and Podlaskie provinces. Warsaw’s authorities changed the logo, arguing that the withdrawn sign had become ‘unattractive and unmodern’ (UM Warszawa, 2022). The last group of reasons concerns the visual identification management system (VIS), and a detailed analysis shows that these reasons can be divided into four subgroups (Klint et al., 2014):

1. In the VIS project itself (project level)
2. In the implementation of the VIS project (project level/user level).
3. In the current use of VIS in its current form (user level).
4. In the design and implementation of further instruments (user level/project level).

In the first subgroup, one can distinguish reasons related to the requirements of the authorities and the local community towards the logo, e.g.: defined brand values or lack of such definition, brand architecture, improperly defined market(s) (target groups), brand boundaries (what the brand should and should not cover). In this subgroup, there may be problems with the flexibility of the system (e.g. in Starachowice the authorities decided that the withdrawn logo was not suitable for the Internet, which

the authors personally confirmed), the selection of basic elements (fonts, colours, illustrations) and finally with the lack of uniqueness of individual components (e.g. using Windows system fonts or Apple).

Implementation issues concern documentation management and access to it, e.g.: the authors confirmed three cases (Radzionkow, Wronki and Wrzesnia) that the documentation was incomplete, which made it impossible to introduce the logo into marketing practice and manage it effectively. Another reason for changing the logo was the internal and external hostility towards the visual identification system developed by the individuals implementing the project. Internal hostility means a situation in which employees do not accept the system and do not want to use it. External hostility concerns problems in cooperation with external partners, e.g. printing houses point out technical errors. The last subgroup of operational and management problems is the stability (rigidity) of the VIS. The developed system does not provide for the possibility of changes, updates, and adaptations to changing media and technologies. The authors identified two such cases, Krakow and Sandomierz logo, in which the local government units, in cooperation with the creators of the original projects, were required to introduce changes to the rather rigid visual identification system due to the necessity to adopt the system to new technologies.

The authors' research indicates additional reasons for changing the logo of places. These are as follows: (1) procedural errors, some logos were selected during competitions that are not interesting for professional graphic designers, which sometimes resulted in rumours in the public sphere as happened in the case of Rudziniec and Wadowice; (2) the electoral cycle (e.g., in the case of Bytom, Polkowice or Ketrzyn powiat); (3) unrepresentative online voting to select a sign, as it happened in Chrzanow or Tczew powiat; and finally (4) ideology which resulted in the need to change the logo of the Swietokrzyskie Voivodeship, because the previous one was related to legends, and the current authorities believed that the logo should contain catholic content. The authors confirmed all these cases through interviews at relevant local government offices.

Rebranding by changing the name is also more difficult in branding places than in business. The research confirmed only three cases of changing the name of a place, i.e. Stargard Szczecinski to Stargard, Jelenia Gora County to Karkonosze County (in these cases VIS remained unchanged) and West Pomeranian Voivodeship to West Pomerania out of over 2,800 local governments in Poland.

Finally, it should be emphasised that changing the logo as a symbolic sign with which the commune wants to be associated and recognised is a process dependent on place identity. The latter, in turn, is strongly related to the history and tradition of the place, which is important for what sociologists and psychologists call place identity, and which urban planners call the spirit of the place. This is why further research on the causes of changes in the visual identity of a place should link the content of the logo and its change with place identity.

In summary, single logo changes can and sometimes are justified, but there remains a more general question about the number of changes, given the fact that cities (and other territories) are more durable brands than commercial brands (Mollerup, 2013). However, during the investigation, a striking event was observed in the case of the change that took place in Suwalki on February 21-22, 2024, where a new visual identification was introduced and withdrawn within one day (Fig. 1). As the Branding Monitor (2024) wrote: "Thus, it was probably the fastest rebranding of the introduced brand change in Poland, and maybe even in the world". This case encouraged the authors to conduct an individual interview in the city of Suwalki with one of the officials. As confirmed, the implementation of the new logo was to help in the local government election campaign. However, it turned out that the rebranding proposal had been used by opposition's election committees to attack the city authorities. As the respondent informed, the attempt to change the city's visual identification had such a serious impact that there was a second round of elections for the city's mayor. This is one case of the impact of political activities on decisions about visual identification, proven in research. However, given the increasing role of politics in social life, it can be hypothesized that the logo may become a tool in political competition. This is another issue that requires further in-depth research.

Logo 2011-2024 Withdrawn logo, replaced with a new one, and returned	The logo was valid for 1 day, February 22/23, 2024
	

Fig. 1. Suwalki logo (Source: Authors' research)

* So far, this case has not been subjected to scientific analysis. Media sources:

<https://radio5.com.pl/2024/02/stare-logo-zostaje/>

<https://www.suwalki.info/wiadomosci/z-zycia-miasta/nowe-logo-nie-przetrwalo-nawet-doby>

<https://www.radio.bialystok.pl/wiadomosci/index/id/236099>

In summary, it should be noted that, in the case of a place brand, it is difficult to indicate a model that would allow defining the reasons why it is necessary to change or modify the content of the logo, which is an expression of the visual identity of the place. The logo of a city, region, or country is intended to reveal the most important characteristics of a given place for the community. They change rarely, and certainly at a very slow pace. Therefore, in the case of place rebranding, there is no empirically justified model for changing the content of the logo. Many factors determine the content of the logo of a place, as well as determinants that impact the need for such a change.

The limitation of the presented research is the fact that the research was carried out in one country, Poland, which must have been important for the indicated research conclusions. However, so far, other researchers analysing similar issues have not formulated a universal model of both place branding and place rebranding. The place as the subject of marketing activities probably escapes the theory derived from commercial experience. Another limitation of research is the process of creating visual symbols of a place. It is a complex process in which many entities participate (residents, decision-makers, graphic designers, etc.), influenced by history, cultural heritage, and the current needs and expectations of the community.

A study of 354 cases of changing or withdrawing place logos in Poland reveals that they were not proactive triggers, as indicated by Miller et al. (2014). A detailed analysis of each case shows that decisions were subjective and resulted more from the political goals and aspirations of authorities than from marketing analysis as it is practised in business.

The research discussed is important for place branding or territorial marking because it reveals, first, the frequency of changes and, second, the difficulty in defining the causes of these changes. However, the most important conclusion resulting from this research is the thesis that each case of a territorial unit should be examined not only by analysing the content of the logo but also by using other research tools that will allow one to recognise the motivations of both the commissioners and the creators of the signs. Therefore, to verify the hypotheses presented, it is not enough to analyse the frequency of changes. Extensive research is needed to consider the representations and perception of logos.

In addition, the logo is a sign with which the inhabitants of a given place should also identify. Therefore, further research should link the issue of place identity and/or the spirit of the place with the content of the logo, both at the theoretical (sociological, psychological, marketing, and management) and practical levels (creating and changing the content of the place logo).

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