

Exploring Instagram's Projection of Functional Urban Areas' Brand Attributes and Values in Poland

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Abstract

Purpose: Municipal authorities utilize branding as a strategic tool to stimulate local economic growth, attract skills, and increase visitor numbers. This paper seeks to explore the categories of brand attributes and brand values included in brand propositions of Functional Urban Areas (FUA) in Poland. The research adopted a social media-based city branding perspective, focusing on content generated by cities forming the core of FUA's. These brand propositions were specifically examined through their portrayal on the Instagram platform.

Methodology: Utilizing a qualitative approach, content analysis was performed on 559 posts from official Instagram accounts of nine core cities of Metropolitan FUAs throughout the height of the tourist season. Human coding method was implemented.

Findings: The analysis identified "nature," "cityscape," and "things to do" as the most frequent brand attributes in the examined FUAs. Among brand values, "excitement," "sincerity," and "neatness" were most common, with two additional FUA-specific values: "knowledge" and "playfulness".

Practical implications: Metropolitan FUA branding on Instagram appears unplanned and somewhat random. Conclusions from the research might be useful in developing the branding strategy of promotion of the FUAs by highlighting the need for intentional, differentiated brand propositions that leverage unique characteristics and are effectively communicated through social media.

Originality: This paper contributes to the theory of city branding in two areas: the development of a comprehensive list of potential brand attributes and brand values utilized in urban branding activities, and the empirical verification of the adaptability of this list for analyzing branding initiatives undertaken by cities serving as cores of FUAs.

Keywords branding, Instagram, FUA, Metropolitan Functional Urban Area, Poland.

INTRODUCTION

Place branding is gaining popularity as both a research focus and self-governance practice (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). There is a noticeable rise in the quantity of research and publications in this domain. Place branding establishes itself as a multidisciplinary research field that tackles a range of intricate themes (Lucarelli & Berg, 2011).

It has recently become a point of interest among scholars in the field of public administration (Zavattaro et al., 2021). This trend is driven by the growing interest of local and regional authorities in public branding initiatives aimed at enhancing place development. Increasingly, these authorities employ branding to stimulate economic growth of the place, attract talents, and draw visitors. Local governments engage in branding as a strategy to foster positive associations with a location and to differentiate it from others (González et al., 2025).

Place branding should be distinguished from promotion and marketing. Promotion focuses on communicating the unique attributes of a place to attract the attention of specific target groups. Marketing extends beyond promotion by encompassing activities aimed at delivering value and meeting the expectations of audiences. Branding, however, represents the most comprehensive approach, centered on the strategic development of a place's identity and image (Boisen et al., 2018).

The branding of places operates in various forms, as it concerns different categories of locations - national, regional, urban branding, and the branding of tourist destinations. Recently, there has been a growing popularity of branding Functional Urban Areas (FUAs) (Matwiejczyk, 2023).

The identification of a FUA can be based on the definition provided by the OECD, which describes it as a settlement system with urban centers that exhibit a population density exceeding 1,500 inhabitants per square kilometer. Furthermore, at least 15% of the population within the entire FUA must be employed in these urban centers. From a branding perspective, FUAs combine the characteristics of multiple territorial units, making their brand management significantly more complex than that of individual cities (Matwiejczyk, 2023). One potential way to reconcile these discrepancies is through the inclusion of tourist attractions,

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which appear to be significant factors in defining the brand identity of FUAs (Glińska et al., 2021). While there is a substantial body of literature on brand management and several studies addressing FUAs—typically within a delimitative or managerial context—the intersection of these two areas remains notably underexplored, highlighting a clear research gap.

At the same time, the literature on the subject emphasizes deficiencies in theoretical knowledge and evidence-based research regarding the influence of social media on the development of destination brands (Stojanovic et al., 2017; Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020). Across the bulk of the publications addressing this issue, the focus of scholars is on users' engagement and interactivity, with comparatively less emphasis on projecting brand messages (Pasquinelli et al., 2022). Only a small number of studies address how tourist destinations employ social media to promote their identities and brands (Huertas & Marine-Roig, 2016).

This study seeks to explore the types of brand attributes and brand values incorporated into the brand propositions of FUAs in Poland, as projected on the Instagram platform. The study examines the issue of city branding through the lens of social media, focusing on marketer-generated content (Pasquinelli et al., 2022) published by FUA management organizations. A qualitative approach was adopted for the research, which involved collecting posts from the official Instagram accounts of nine urban cores within Metropolitan FUAs in Poland. Data collection occurred during the height of the tourist season, spanning from July 1 to August 31, 2021, yielding a total of 559 posts for content analysis.

BACKGROUND

Place/Destination Branding

The image of a location is one of the most important factors in choosing a travel destination and presents a challenge for destination management organizations (Ageevaa & Foroudia, 2019). An effective method for raising awareness and building a positive image of a place is through destination branding (Ageevaa & Foroudia, 2019).

A place brand is defined as a “network of associations within the minds of customers which is based on visual, verbal, and behavioral expression of a place embodied through goals, communication, values, and general culture of the place's stakeholders and its overall design” (Zenker, 2011). It is based on the perception of a specific territory among target groups. This perception is shaped both by the physical features of the place, intentionally implemented communication actions, as well as any unintentional messages about the place reaching its potential customers. (Zenker & Braun, 2010). Developing a place brand involves implementing effective marketing strategies, allowing locations to differentiate themselves from competitors by strategically highlighting their economic, social, political, or cultural assets and strengths (Kaplan et al., 2010).

The idea of a brand is intricately linked to the concept of branding, which is seen as a management strategy that can reach a wide range of stakeholders and, importantly, create images that fit today's mediated world. Place branding is based on visuals and associations, as well as emotion-based communication (González et al., 2025).

Place branding encompasses intentional actions aimed at altering or enhancing the existing image (Baker, 2012, p. 18), which involve the development, strategic planning, and communication of the city's brand identity to shape its intended image and oversee its management (Anholt, 2007, p. 11). Brands are intended to convey specific attributes of a city - functional, physical, and emotional - endowing them with particular significance (Klijn et al., 2012). Destination branding involves choosing cohesive brand elements to identify and differentiate a specific location, with the goal of creating a positive image (Cai, 2011). This process involves generalizing the desired characteristics of the place to be promoted, aiming to help tourists form a connection with the brand by offering a value proposition that appeals to them (Qu et al., 2011).

The main goal of the branding application for place management is to ensure that, in response to the exposure of a place's name, several consistent associations related to it appear in people's minds, aligned with the marketing strategy developed by the managers of that destination. Effective management of this network of associations should focus on creating a more recognizable, distinctive, and unique brand for the place (Sevin, 2014). Even though not all destinations have consciously created their brands, these brands, broadly understood as identities, always exist and need to be communicated (Huertas & Marine-Roig, 2016).

Brand building is greatly enhanced by social media, where the brand proposition initiated by management interacts with user-generated content, fostering meaning-making and the formation of the place brand (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2019; Glińska & Rudolf, 2019; Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020; Pasquinelli et al. 2022). Huertas and Marine-Roig (2016) confirm that social media have become essential tools for communicating destinations and their brands. Tourism destination managers heavily rely on social media to communicate brand propositions and build the brand's online reputation (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

The marketing messages created by organizations and users, along with related content, significantly influence the perception, attractiveness, and image of tourist destinations (Munar, 2011; Nowacki & Niezgoda, 2020). According to Iglesias-Sánchez et al. (2020), social media platforms are not only a communication tool but also play an active role in shaping the destination's image. The topic of destination image has been extensively explored in the existing literature, yet there remains a gap in studies specifically focused on projecting brand messages through social media (Pascinelli et al., 2022). Research on city destination branding and social media has primarily concentrated on Facebook (Huertas & Marine-Roig, 2016; Glińska & Rudolf, 2019) and less often on Instagram (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020).

City Brand Attributes and Brand Values

The projected brand of a place should be shaped around its functional features (such as tourist amenities, transportation and infrastructure and accessibility), which are responsible for the cognitive (cognitive) aspect of the place's image and symbolic attributes (such as family orientation, affiliation with celebrities), shaping the affective component of the image (Prayag, 2010). Vinyals-Mirabent et al. (2019) highlight a widespread recognition of the dual nature of these associations: perceptual versus affective (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999).

In the literature on place branding, the topic of the two dimensions of a brand—the representational and the functional—is addressed only sporadically. Giovanardi (2012) emphasizes that there are unresolved issues concerning brand attributes, requiring further research, especially in the realm of the relationship between the representational dimension of place branding and the functional dimension. This issue has been tackled so far by only a few authors, including Caldwell & Freire (2004), Lloyd & Peel (2008), and in recent years by Vinyals-Mirabent et al. (2019) and Pasquinelli et al. (2022).

Destination brands express a dual nature involving cognitive and emotional elements. This duality encompasses functional or tangible aspects and emotional facets, addressing attraction factors and values linked to emotion. Attraction factors refer to the appealing assets a destination possesses, while emotional values denote the characteristics representing its personality (Huertas & Marine-Roig, 2016). Brand attributes and brand values are two essential aspects of a destination brand. When analyzed together, they provide insights into the brand attitude that drives action and influences tourist behavior (Pasquinelli et al., 2022).

Several authors have noted that the functional attributes of tourist destinations, on their own, are insufficient to attract travelers, primarily due to the increasing substitutability of destinations (Hanna & Rowley, 2019). Souiden et al. (2017) demonstrated that the functional components of a brand's image serve as a precursor to the psychological formation of the brand's personality. Vinyals-Mirabent et al. (2019) found that functional associations (i.e., attributes) directly impact the personality traits that individuals assign to a destination brand (Pasquinelli et al., 2022). Earlier, place marketing strategies mainly focused on highlighting the functional attributes of a place, such as the beauty of the environment and extensive infrastructure. Recently, however, the attention of place marketing has shifted towards promoting attractions that have an impact on the emotions of the recipients of branding efforts (Konecnik Ruzzier & de Chernatony, 2013).

METHOD

The study employed a city branding perspective using social media, specifically focusing on content generated by marketers and disseminated by the FUAs' administrative organizations on Instagram (Pasquinelli et al., 2022). Instagram accounts were selected for analysis because, as noted earlier, research on city destination branding and social media has predominantly focused on Facebook. Although Facebook remains a popular platform, not all FUAs had official accounts on Facebook during the analyzed period. Moreover, the content shared on Facebook was primarily informational in nature. In contrast, Instagram was the platform where all the analyzed cities had established accounts. Since FUAs themselves do not maintain official social media accounts, the analysis was conducted based on the Instagram profiles of their core cities, which also shared content related to the broader FUA area. To ensure a parallel and consistent analysis, the study focused on the projected brand propositions of nine Metropolitan FUAs that function in Poland.

The study included Polish FUAs according to the concept of Śleszyński (2013). Selected for the study were only metropolitan FUAs indicated in the "Concept of Spatial Management of the Country", namely, Bydgoszcz-Toruń, Gdańsk, Katowice, Kraków, Lublin, Łódź, Poznań, Szczecin, and Wrocław. The FUA of Warsaw was excluded from the study, as it is the capital of the country with the greatest potential and resources which ranks it as the only one in Poland as a potential European metropolis (ESPON).

Furthermore, it should be emphasized that during the research phase, the Bydgoszcz-Toruń FUA was split, creating two separate FUAs. According to the classification, however, it was their combination that determined their classification as a metropolis. Toruń and Bydgoszcz as separate FUAs do not meet the requirements to qualify as metropolitan areas, being currently qualified as FUAs of regional centers. In addition, based on available reports, it is Bydgoszcz that meets all four of the required criteria for an economic base. Toruń, on the other hand, is characterized by the small size of its economic base and its low level of development (Sobala-Gwosdz, 2024). These cities have also been in conflict with each other for a long time, which has meant that no official social media account has been created to promote such an area. For this reason, Bydgoszcz, as a larger city with greater development potential, was included in the analysis as a representative of the Bydgoszcz-Toruń FUA during the analyzed time period. Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that both Bydgoszcz and Toruń accounts were characterized by low activity on Instagram during the analyzed time period. Thus, all analyzed units were characterized by their similar size, as well as their character as the core of the FUA being the capital of the Voivodeship and qualifying as a metropolitan area.

The researchers employed a qualitative approach to gather and analyze the research material, which is particularly suitable for gaining in-depth insights into new or relatively underexplored phenomena in their full complexity and variability (Maison, 2007). As previously noted, the chosen research method consisted of content analysis of posts sourced from official Instagram accounts of the nine urban cores within Metropolitan FUAs in Poland. Posts were manually compiled, covering the period from July 1 to August 31, 2021, resulting in a total of 559 posts analyzed. The selected period for analysis coincides with the summer holiday season, a time when cities actively seek to attract tourists and potential new residents, including students, before the onset of autumn. This timeframe also allowed for an examination of whether the holiday season influenced the frequency of social media activity by city managers. All posts shared on Instagram during the selected period were included in the study, with each post analyzed individually. Accounts were not excluded from the analysis, regardless of the frequency of their activity during the period, as the objective was to identify the attributes and values conveyed by all the core cities of the selected FUAs.

Content analysis is "an approach to the analysis of documents and texts that seeks to quantify content in terms of predetermined categories and in a systematic and replicable manner" (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 291). In this study, directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281) was applied. During the coding process, researchers utilized both codes derived from existing theory and those developed independently based on the results obtained. The analysis conducted involved skimming (a superficial examination), reading (a thorough examination), and interpretation (Bowen, 2009). The human coding method was employed, offering deeper insights into the raw data, which was beneficial given the exploratory nature of the study. The manual effort was feasible due to the relatively small sample size.

The adopted research methodology was subject to several limitations. The analysis of posts conducted for this study was exclusively qualitative, meaning the research process relied on the knowledge and intuition of the researchers. Consequently, it was characterized by the subjectivity inherent in data organization and interpretation. However, the authors viewed this feature of the chosen method as a specificity rather than a drawback (Maison, 2010). They sought to avoid errors associated with selective perception by maintaining openness and rigor throughout the analysis process.

Another limitation arose from the use of human coding in the qualitative analysis. This approach to coding has well-documented drawbacks, including subjectivity and bias (Krippendorff, 2018), cognitive fatigue of researchers (Guest et al., 2012), and challenges in replicability (Schreier, 2012). The authors mitigated these limitations through their research expertise and the implementation of robust coding protocols designed to address the challenges associated with human coding in qualitative research.

The conducted study was exploratory in nature. Future research could benefit from adopting a mixed-methods approach, which combines quantitative metrics with qualitative analysis to provide a more comprehensive examination of branding strategies.

As was explained in the previous part of the paper, destination brands encompass both cognitive/functional and affective/emotional dimensions, which should be taken into account when evaluating destination brand content communication (Marine-Roig, 2016). With regard to brand attributes, the coding system was composed on the coding system proposed by Huertas and Marine-Roig (2016) and included the categories of Nature, Tangible Heritage, Cityscape, Intangible Heritage, Gastronomy, Leisure, Sun and Beach, Business/trade, Sport, Technology, Services, Things to do, Tourist information, and Institution and Non-tourist information. In turn, in relation to brand value, the development of code systems based on the works of authors such as Aaker (1997), Glińska and Kilon (2014), Hanna and Rowley (2019), and Pasquinelli et al. (2022). Ultimately, it encompassed the following categories: Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication, Ruggedness, Malignancy, Peacefulness, Conservatism, Neatness, and Other. This study identified two additional brand values specific to the FUAs analyzed: "knowledge" and "playfulness".

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study collected 559 screenshots of posts posted on the Instagram platform by the cores of Metropolitan FUAs that were selected for analysis (Figure 1).



Figure 1. An example of collected posts

Source: https://www.instagram.com/krakow_pl/.

Almost all posts were posted in Polish. Two of the analyzed cities opted for occasional posts in English in an attempt to engage foreign tourists/residents (Gdańsk, Wrocław). The frequency of postings on Instagram varied significantly between the analyzed units (Table 1).

Table 1. Frequency of posting on Instagram

FUA's core	July 2021	August 2021	total
Bydgoszcz	9	6	15
Gdańsk	31	31	62
Kraków	15	5	20
Lublin	23	24	47
Łódź	123	110	233
Poznań	46	43	89
Rzeszów	31	30	61
Szczecin	7	8	15
Wrocław	8	9	17

Source: compiled by the authors.

Łódź firmly differentiates itself in terms of activity, seeking to engage its observers by posting up to several posts a day. However, the reduced activity of some of the units may have been caused by the vacation period of the analyzed time frame (July - August).

Figure 2 illustrates the attributes used by individual cities (Metropolitan FUAs' cores) in posts from July and August 2021.

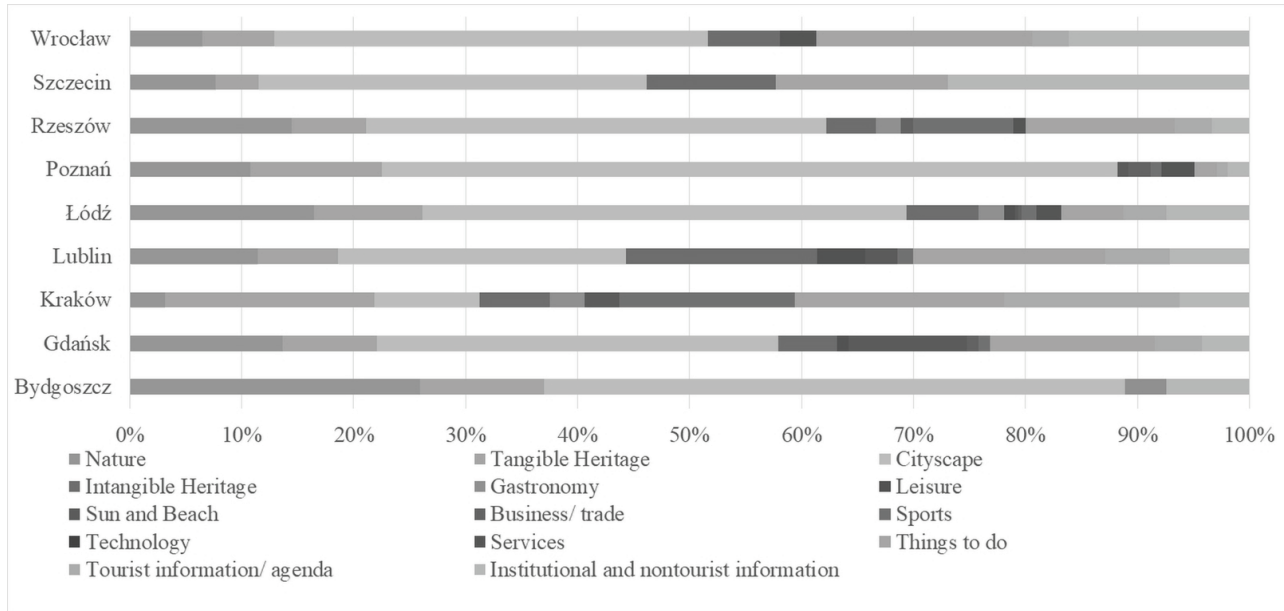


Figure 2. Frequency of attributes used by individual Metropolitan FUAs' cores

Source: compiled by the authors.

In Figure 2, it is immediately noticeable that “cityscape” dominated within the attributes, while the least frequent ones included “technology” and “business/trade”, which were virtually absent from the analyzed posts in the selected time period.

Figure 3 illustrates the values used by individual cities (Metropolitan FUAs' cores) in posts from July and August 2021.

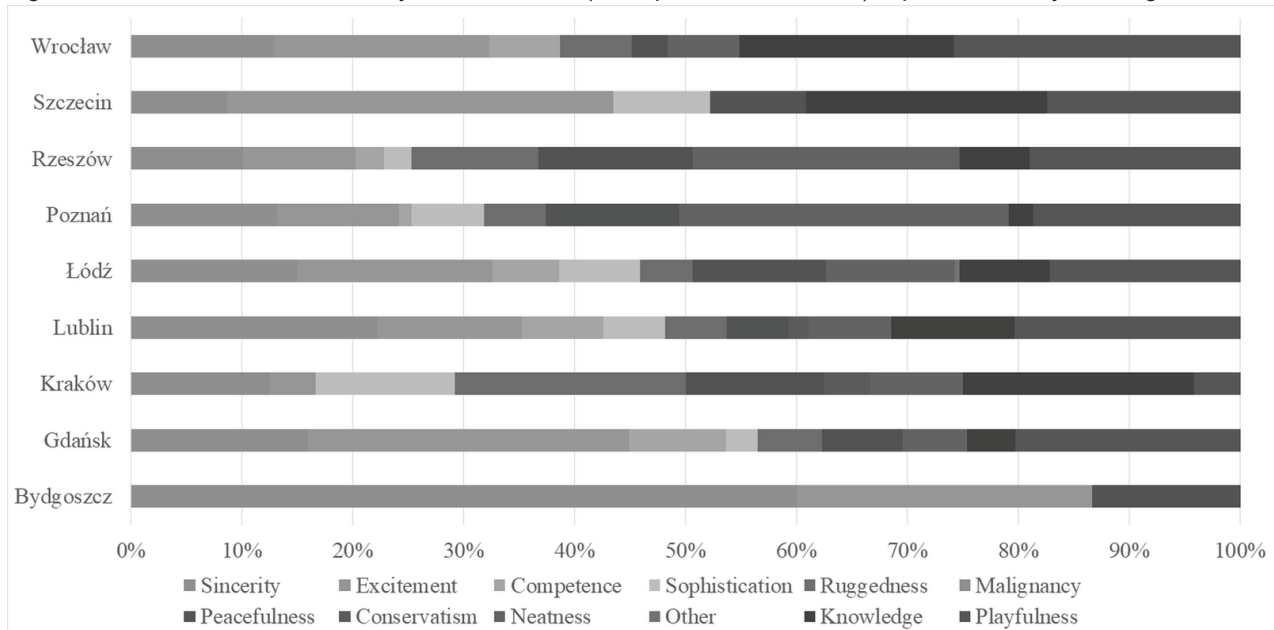


Figure 3. Frequency of values used by individual Metropolitan FUAs' cores

Source: compiled by the authors.

There is a noticeable dominance of “playfulness”, “excitement”, and “sincerity” in terms of brand values amongst the analyzed units. What else is worth noting is how Bydgoszcz differs from the other cities in this case - it is the only entity assigned with only three brand values, which may or may not indicate a more focused branding effort.

As presented in the part on the research design, the coders identified the analyzed posts based on a list of brand attributes and brand values emerging from the literature analysis (Pasquinelli et al., 2022; Hanna & Rowley, 2019; Glińska & Kilon, 2014). However, there were posts that, in the opinion of the coder, required additional categories, as those within the scale did not allow the posts to be categorized correctly. Among both the identified brand attributes and brand values, there were categories that did not correspond to any of the analyzed posts. As a result, a list of brand attributes and brand values was created, which referred to the core cities of Polish Metropolitan FUAs (Table 2).

Table 2. List of identified brand attributes and brand values with frequency of their occurrence within analyzed posts

Brand attributes	%	Brand values	%
Cityscape	58,7	Playfulness	19,7
Nature	19,3	Excitement	18,8
Tangible Heritage	13,1	Sincerity	17,2
Things to do	13,1	Neatness	15,2
Institutional and non-tourist information	9,5	Peacefulness	11,8
Intangible Heritage	8,6	Knowledge	9,1
Tourist information/agenda	5,4	Ruggedness	7,0
Sports	3,6	Sophistication	6,3
Sun and Beach	2,7	Competence	5,2
Services	2,1	Conservatism	0,4
Gastronomy	2,0	Other	0,2
Leisure	1,3	<u>Malignancy</u>	0,0
Business/trade	0,9		
<u>Technology</u>	0,0		

Source: compiled by the authors.

Notably, several attributes and values were assigned to each of the analyzed posts. There is also a noticeable lack of attributes such as “technology” and values such as “malignancy” among the examined cores of FUAs’ during the analyzed period. These values have been underlined and will not be mentioned in the subsequent description. Brand values “playfulness” and “knowledge” have been bolded as added values from the coder’s side.

Noticeably, among the sampled FUAs, the most common attributes were “cityscape”, “nature”, “things to do” and “tangible heritage”. Of the posts analyzed, the following descriptions exemplify their connection to the assigned attributes:

- “Cityscape”, in the case of the analyzed posts, were predominantly the ones depicting beautiful shots of cities, both the familiar ones and those less obvious to tourists.
- Under “nature”, attention was paid to urban greenery, or the beauty of the surrounding nature in a particular city.
- “Tangible heritage” represented, as the name suggests, the physical aspects of the city that are their distinguishing features in comparison to other cities.
- The “things to do” category included posts that informed both locals and tourists about attractions, both new and long-established ones.
- “Institutional and non-tourist information” indicated, among other things, planned activities within the budget or the planned census.
- Similarly to “tangible heritage” - “intangible heritage” pointed to traditions, recipes and other cultural elements that characterize a city and set it apart from others.
- “Tourist information/agenda” manifested itself primarily as information about upcoming cultural events, such as festivals or competitions.
- The posts under “sports” represented the multitude of tourist attractions available, both accessible and planned.
- “Sun and beach” referred mainly to cities that have access to extensive watersides and the attractions that are offered in their area.
- Posts under “services” provided information about existing services within the city that are worth visiting, including local museums and artisans.
- “Gastronomy”, similarly to “services” encouraged people to try local gastronomy, highlighting the craftsmanship of the prepared dishes.
- The posts that were attributed to “leisure” represented recreational opportunities within the city.
- “Business/trade” is a category where posts indicated the development of the city in terms of internal and external business investments.

Among brand values the most prevalent were: “playfulness”, “excitement” and “sincerity”. The following descriptions show which types of posts have been assigned to which brand values:

- “Playfulness” included posts that attempted to engage the audience in dialogue in a humorous way, often using emoticons and photos in warm colors. Unlike “excitement” – those posts were clearly created for the sake of fun and engagement of followers without the focus of presenting the highlights of the city.
- Under “excitement”, posts were characterized by being daring, spirited, imaginative, and up to date with trends and events in the city, similar to those of “playfulness” also used emoticons and additionally used a large number of exclamation marks and words written in capital letters.
- “Sincerity” - these posts presented the facts in a down-to-earth way, giving a frank account of the city’s situation and its plans for the future (e.g., plans to increase urban greenery).
- “Neatness” contained aesthetically pleasing shots of cities, and the descriptions created for them were characterized by thorough preparation of the material.
- “Peacefulness” posts focused primarily on photos, pointing out the tranquility that can be found even in the heart of the city.
- The “Knowledge” values category was tasked with educating followers about the city and its history and emphasized its relevance for future generations as well.
- “Ruggedness” expressed through descriptions and photos of exciting, and sometimes dangerous activities that will ensure that life in such a city never becomes boring.
- “Sophistication” emphasized through luxurious activities, often associated with higher expenses for their fulfilment.
- “Competence” within which posts created an image of a modern city led by intelligent and trustworthy people.
- “Conservatism” primarily contained posts that created an image of a city that was strongly religious and supportive of conservative ideals.
- “Other” included the remaining posts that failed to be assigned to any of the identified categories, and which together were unable to form a category apart from “other.”

In order to take a closer look at the occurrence but also correspondence of brand attributes and brand values in individual cities, the following subsections have been set out to address them.

Brand Attributes

For brand attributes, a correspondence analysis was conducted in terms of published posts combined in July and August (Figure 4). Such an overview will make it possible to see whether the attributes that can be attributed to the various cores of metropolitan FUAs are indeed created deliberately and continuously or are more a work of chance.

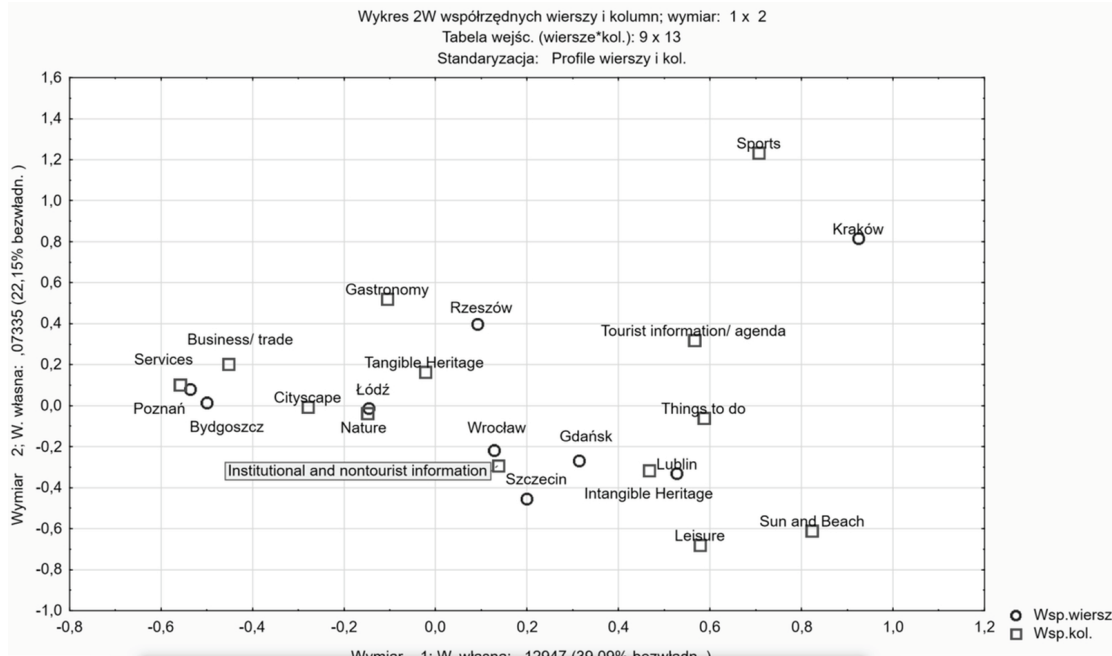


Figure 4. Correspondence analysis: City vs. brand attributes frequency - July and August 2021 combined

Source: compiled by the authors.

Considering the combined analysis of posts from July and August, it's possible to notice the following clusters:

- Services - business/trade, these are attributes that are closely related, as much of the business mentioned in the posts was about services;
- Bydgoszcz - Poznań, which corresponds to the cluster identified in the correspondence analysis for the August posts;
- Tangible heritage - cityscape - nature;
- Wrocław - Gdańsk - Szczecin - Lublin, these are cities that used similar attributes within their posts in both months;
- Intangible heritage - things to do; and
- Leisure - sun and beach.

It is also worth noting that within Figure 4, Kraków did not belong to any of the clusters, it was a city that used distinctly different attributes within its posts compared to the other units.

Brand Values

As in the case of brand attributes, for brand values a correspondence analysis was conducted for posts published in July and August combined (Figure 5).

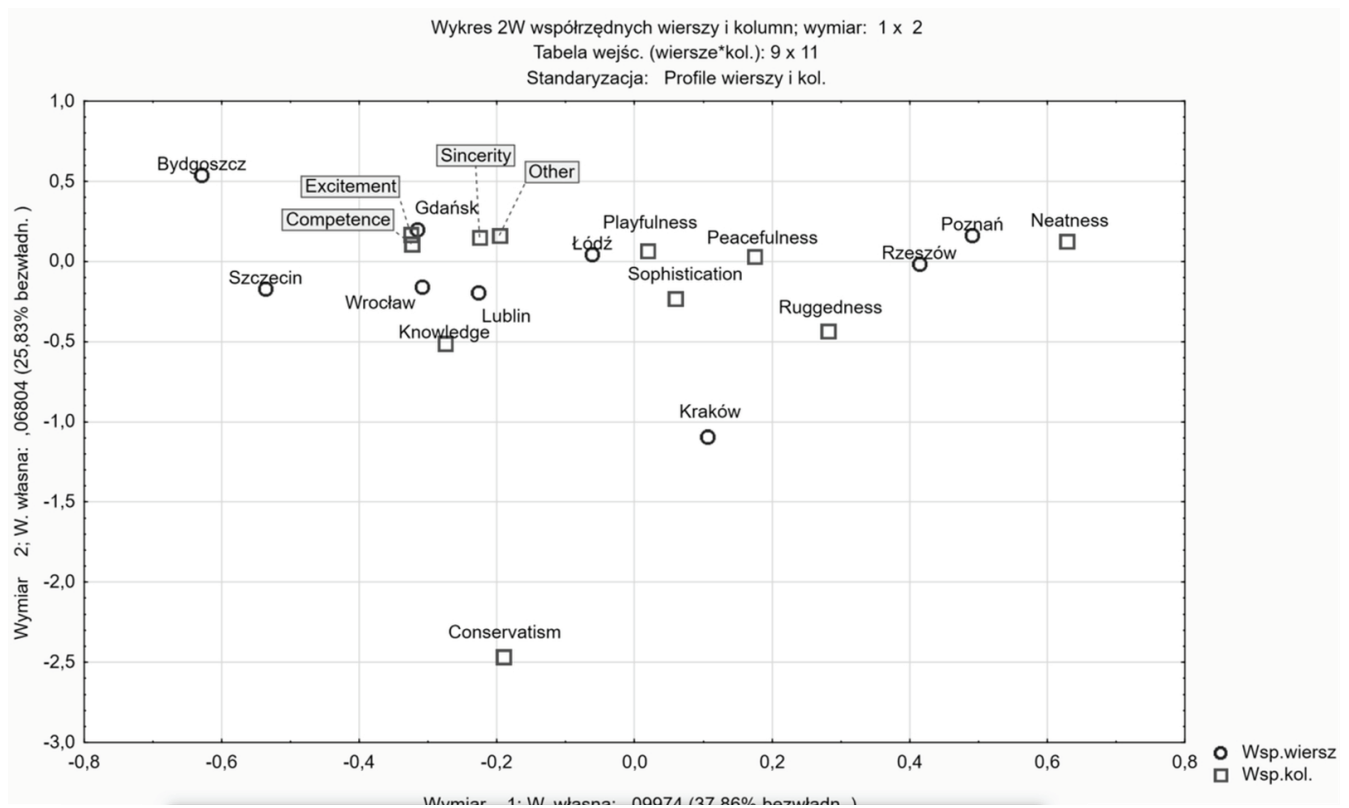


Figure 5. Correspondence analysis: City vs. brand values frequency - July and August 2021 combined

Source: compiled by the authors.

Based on an analysis of the correspondence of the combined postings from July and August, the formation of these clusters can be identified:

- Excitement - competence, with a very strong correspondence;
- Sincerity - other, which is not an official cluster worth including in the conclusions as the category “other” contains non-matching values that did not fit any other categories;
- Wrocław - Lublin, cities that have similarly manifested brand values within their postings such as “knowledge”; and
- Poznań - Rzeszów, cities that have similarly manifested brand values within their postings such as “neatness” and “ruggedness”.

As in the case of attributes, it can be noted that Kraków is located furthest from the other cities analyzed, which may confirm the different approach to the brand they create. The same is true for the value "conservatism", which, due to its rare occurrence (see Table 2), has not formed any cluster.

The other values and cities are far enough apart in Figure 5 that it is difficult to conclude that there is particular correspondence indicating additional clusters.

When analyzing the correspondence, it was often impossible to identify clusters due to the fact that cities used similar attributes and values, but in different months. However, two strong clusters could be noted, such as excitement - competence (identified under brand values), or Wrocław - Lublin (which were in the same clusters in terms of attributes and values for July and August combined).

CONCLUSIONS

Managers of place brands play a key role in choosing the components that form the brand identity and shaping the brand's value proposition. This process involves strengthening the established brand (Pasquinelli et al., 2022). Place branding is dedicated to establishing a brand management system that revolves around the unique identity and distinguishing characteristics of a specific location (Sevin, 2014). By assigning symbolic significance to a particular place, a brand elevates its value in relation to the psychological and social requirements of both current and potential users, such as tourists (Boisen et al., 2011).

Based on the research conducted, which included skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination) and interpreting the posts that the selected cores of metropolitan FUAs published in July and August 2021, there is considerable similarity in the way they branded themselves. Given that Instagram is an image-focused platform - cities primarily relied on showcasing nature, heritage, and cityscape. In terms of values, these cities strive to look primarily competent, but at the same time playful and excited about their own city and its possibilities. It is possible that this is dictated by the fact that Instagram is a social media more frequently used by younger people than Facebook, for example. In Poland, as of 2019, the largest age group on Instagram were people between 18 and 24, while on Facebook it was people between 25 and 34—and as the users themselves note—the age of the average user continues to increase (IAB Polska, 2019).

However, the analysis indicates that these branding efforts are largely subconscious rather than deliberate. Previous research on the available strategies of FUAs has demonstrated that branding was not prioritized in the activities undertaken during the analyzed period (Matwiejczyk, 2023). The similarity in brand attributes and values projected by the analyzed cities' social media accounts reflects a shared desire to appear competent, approachable, and entertaining. While this strategy attracts younger audiences, it inadvertently diminishes the visibility of distinctive local features. As a result, smaller cities risk being overshadowed by larger, more established urban centers that project comparable brand narratives with greater resources.

This study contributes to the understanding of place branding by introducing "playfulness" and "knowledge" as notable brand values. The emergence of playfulness, in particular, illustrates how cities leverage Instagram to project a lighthearted identity. Unlike "excitement," which emphasizes extraordinary events, playfulness reflects a consistent and intrinsic aspect of the brand's personality (Keng et al. 2013).

This study advances the theory of city branding in two ways: First, by establishing a comprehensive catalog of potential brand attributes and values employed in urban branding practices; and second, by empirically validating the applicability of this catalog for evaluating branding initiatives implemented by cities that function as central hubs within urban functional areas.

A critical limitation of this study is the lack of official social media accounts specifically designed to connect FUA residents with their management. The few existing Facebook accounts are sparse and formal, serving primarily as informational channels. Consequently, conscious branding opportunities on platforms like Instagram remain unexplored. The absence of official Polish FUA accounts on Instagram further restricts efforts to engage audiences through deliberate branding strategies. Another limitation is the study's geographical scope, which focuses exclusively on Polish FUAs. Expanding the analysis to metropolitan FUAs in other countries could provide insights into their use of social media for branding. Furthermore, comparative studies could explore how the branding strategies of FUAs differ from those of their core cities, offering a broader understanding of branding practices at different administrative levels.

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