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Policy Making and Visual Identity in the Promotion of Territorial Units

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Abstract

Purpose: This article investigates the relationship between public policy, dominant political ideologies, and the visual communication of territorial units. It aims to explore how the neoliberal zeitgeist is reflected in the visual identities (logos and slogans) of Polish cities. The study seeks to answer whether these promotional signs prioritize universal, market-oriented values over the unique, local genius loci.

Methodology: The research is based on a comprehensive analysis of the entire population of 66 cities with powiat rights in Poland. A mixed-method approach was employed, combining a multifaceted content analysis with a semantic differential technique. The visual and textual layers of the promotional signs were systematically examined using three distinct taxonomies to ensure methodological triangulation and enhance the reliability of the findings.

Findings: The analysis reveals the specific values and ideological assumptions embedded in the visual branding strategies of Polish cities. It identifies the prevalence of symbols associated with modernism, progress, and economic efficiency, often at the expense of historical and cultural heritage. The findings demonstrate how visual identity serves as a tool of public policy, reflecting a broader shift towards market-driven governance in local administration.

Originality/Value: This paper contributes to the fields of public policy, place marketing and branding, and visual communication by empirically linking the design of promotional signs to macro-level ideological trends. Its originality lies in the robust,

mixed-method approach applied to a complete national sample, providing a comprehensive diagnosis of how contemporary policy paradigms are visually articulated and communicated by local authorities.

Keywords: Zeitgeist, place branding, territorial marketing, genius loci, policy making

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Introduction: Aims of the Article

Place branding is closely related to the policy-making process (Eisenschitz, 2010; Giraut, Houssay-Holzschuch, 2016; Lucarelli, 2018b, Eisenschitz, 2018). The objective of the present study is to discuss the relationship between policy formulation and the visual identity of a place within the framework of a local government unit (LGU). The purpose of the article is to elucidate the findings derived from an investigation into the content of territorial logos and their associations with the neoliberal paradigm of place branding in the context of promoting territorial units. As a starting point, it is assumed that place branding plays a crucial role in conveying the Zeitgeist understood as “a concept that refers to patterns in meaningful practices that are period-specific, cross over different areas of social life and extend across geographical contexts” (Krause, 2019: 5), and/or genius loci of territory understood as a concept made of three dimensions – visible and tangible layer, invisible experience of the place of residents and visitors and the underlying processes of human and natural activities (Vecco, 2020). The core theoretical foundation of this research is rooted in the exploration of information dissemination within the realms of municipal policy and visual communication. It specifically scrutinizes the origin of information transmission (the sender, which in this case is the municipality) and the semantic substance of verbal and visual messages conveyed by institutional entities.

The primary entity responsible for the branding of the place is acknowledged as the public administration. The execution of territorial marketing is contingent upon the existence of an officially sanctioned institutional body possessing formal or legal authorisation within the administrative framework. According to Rudolf's (2016) proposition, the term ‘Territorial Organisation’ (TO) is utilized to refer to this municipality. In the context of this study, it is recognized as the entity responsible for the branding and marketing initiatives of the specified location. Although acknowledging the existence of uncontrolled communication (Insch, 2011) and the notion of inclusive and participatory branding as articulated in the literature (Kavaratzis, Kalandides, 2015), empirical evidence derived from the research of the authors indicates that the TO exerts effective control over territorial brands. The participation of, for instance, the local community in these processes, in practice, frequently manifests itself as tokenism (Arnstein, 1969).

Within the academic literature, one can locate the proposition that the theoretical or ideological notion of territorial marketing in the practice of municipal, city, or regional policies embodies the ‘neoliberal Zeitgeist’ (Zuboff, 2019), the ‘marketization of public discourse’ (Sekera, 2016) or/and the ‘new spirit of capitalism’ (Boltanski, Chiapello, 2005). Place branding has also become a political tool (Kalandides, 2011; Jernsand, Kraff, 2018). These theoretical frameworks have

culminated in a market-oriented paradigm for the governance of territorial units by the responsible authorities. The transition to place marketing within public management is underpinned by the neoliberal concepts of public service marketisation and the treatment of the city as a corporation that addresses the requirements of 'clients' (Braun 2008: 43) or 'clientele' (Sheller 2008: 110). The interconnection between neoliberalism, market-oriented management of territorial entities, and place branding has been articulated through various perspectives and is broadly acknowledged within scholarly discourse (Grunfeld, 2013:222; Jonas, McCann, and Thomas, 2015; Vanolo, 2017). The implementation of this approach to the management of territorial entities is evident in Poland as well. Therefore, it is reasonably acceptable to expect the neoliberal *Zeitgeist* to be reflected materially in the logos and slogans as a manifestation (DeMarrais et al. 1996) of neoliberalism, utilized in place marketing, given the global prevalence of this ideology during the period 1990 – 2014 (Jonas, McCann, and Thomas, 2015), including in Poland. Throughout this period, there was an observable gradual adoption of new public management concepts (NPM) and public governance in the Polish local government units (Anders-Morawska, Rudolf, 2015; Rudolf, 2016; Sagan, 2017). Consequently, the review of academic literature (Grunfeld, 2013: 215) and scholarly research enables the formulation of the following thesis: Neoliberal values might be noticeable in the visual identity of Polish Local Government Units.

Theoretical framework: What does the Territorial Organisation communicate?

The conceptual transition to place branding within the sphere of public management has been articulated through the frameworks of New Public Management (NPM), public co-governance, especially at the local and regional levels, as well as more contemporary constructs such as New Public Service, Public Value theory, and New Public Governance (Sekera, 2016: 107-110). The interplay between neoliberalism, market-oriented management of territorial units, and the marketing (branding) of places is thoroughly charted and widely acknowledged within the academic literature (Vanolo, 2017). As noted by Gold and Gold, the practice of city branding constitutes a notable reaction to the neoliberal agenda, frequently endorsing the values intrinsic to that agenda without critical examination (Gold, Gold, 2020: 7). In summary, neoliberalism serves as the foundational ideology of place branding within municipal policy (Lucarelli, 2018a).

This approach to managing a territorial unit also takes place in Poland (Rudolf, 2016; Sagan, 2017; Adamus-Matuszyńska, Dzik, 2024). Consequently, neoliberal values are expected to manifest in management practice (Sekera, 2016) and in marketing communication (Dutta, 2016). Since the 1960s, it has been assumed that the basis of such communication is an integrated visual identification system (Wheeler, Meyerson, 2024), and still its most important element is the logo (Grunfeld, 2013) and, as the initial query proved, the slogan.

Recognizing that images (pictures) have served as a fundamental aspect of social communication for millennia, during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, they emerged as a more prominent symbol in the conveyance of messages than at any previous time (Kelly, 2017). Without delving into historical considerations regarding the potency of images within the communication process,

it is imperative to emphasize that the logo, as an image (picture), plays a significant role in the context of place branding (Grunfeld, 2013: 210). Within place branding processes, logos are pivotal elements; they function as symbols that disclose values, history, and the distinctiveness of a place, while also serving as indicators of the prevailing spirit of the times - *Zeitgeist* (Gwiazdzinski, 2013: 278). A logo serves a dual role: first as a sign facilitating the recognition of an entity, and second as a symbol fulfilling a semantic function. The essence of a symbol lies in the association and interconnection of an image with the elements it embodies (Lurker, 2011: 28 - 29). Consequently, the logo, on one hand, functions as a sign that enables the recognition of the city/region it represents, thereby symbolizing the place (*genius loci*); while on the other hand, it acts as a bearer of a particular paradigm shaped by the temporal context of its creation (*Zeitgeist*).

During the latter half of the twentieth century, cities, as well as regions and countries, initiated a transformation into brands (Grunfeld, 2013; Górska-Warsewicz, 2020) as they sought to establish a competitive presence in attracting residents, tourists, and investors. This evolution of cities into brands signified that logos emerged as both instruments and symbols of liberal and neoliberal economic principles and ideologies. Owing to the challenges identified in the scholarly discourse regarding the conceptualization of territory as a marketing product functioning in alignment with the principles established by liberalism, the shift from the macro level (liberalism as an ideology, as well as an economic practice) to the micro level (the logo as an instrumental tool in constructing a place brand) entails the conversion of abstract ideological principles into specific, quantifiable, and interpretable visual and textual components present in implemented logos that exemplify visual identities.

Consequently, it can be anticipated that the neoliberal *Zeitgeist* of a particular location may be discernible within the logos and slogans employed in place marketing. Nevertheless, it is imperative to recognize that the tension between the universalist ideology of neoliberalism and the symbolic components of local identities was already recorded in the 1990s, with an essential analysis conducted by Castells (1999).

At the eighth annual conference of the International Place Branding Association (IPBA), the organization publicized a manifesto intended to articulate contemporary concepts that sum up the fundamental principles of place branding (IPBA 2023). Regarding the 10 principles delineated in the manifesto, within the framework of this article, an axis is of particular relevance: the comprehensive management of the brand's image and reputation. In this axis, the authors, in line with the concept of Boisen et al. (2018), follow an inside-out approach that is oriented towards identity and purpose. Identity is defined in this article as the "spirit of place" (*genius loci*).

The term *genius loci* was incorporated into the language of sociologists and urban planners to denote the unique character of a place, which encompasses nature altered by human activity into a cultural landscape that influences both the existence and perception of things (Spittles, 2015). Operational definition of *genius loci* was offered in contemporary context by Norberg-Schulz (1979: 5): (...) the spaces where life occurs are places (...). A place is a space which has a distinct character. Since ancient times, the *genius loci*, or spirit of place, has been recognised

as the concrete reality man has to face and come to terms with in his daily life. Architecture means to visualize the genius loci and the task of the architect is to create meaningful places, whereby he helps man to dwell.

Nevertheless, the inquiry emerges concerning the methodology for examining the intangible concepts of the spirit of time (Zeitgeist) and the spirit of place (genius loci). Furthermore, what tangible and sensorially perceptible manifestations do these concepts assume?

Currently, visual artefacts through their content transmit information about the place and build impressions and associations in receiver awareness. In addition, communication is multimodal, which has an impact on the branding strategies of territorial units. Marketing has a significant meaning in the communication of Zeitgeist of a place (Gwiazdzinski, 2013), which has its advantages and disadvantages. He writes: Brands, logos, emblems, symbols, landmarks, and other totems are indicative of the Zeitgeist, materials to be analysed, mirrors that magnify and distort the habits and customs of our contemporary societies (2013, p. 273). Analogously, Gwiazdzinski's thesis can be applied not only to the 'spirit of time' but also to the 'spirit of place'. Gwiazdzinski's use of the term 'totem' allows us to refer to Mitchell's works in which he postulates that images exert an influence on the observer, and within the paradigm of the viewer, he categorizes them into three types: fetish, idol, and totem. Specifically, in his scholarship, logos are delineated as totems (Mitchell, 2005:164). In a tabular presentation summarising the attributes of fetish, idol, and totem, Mitchell enumerates several distinguishing characteristics. Within the scope of this article, the following characteristics of a totem are crucial: it is contemporary, its ritual practice manifests itself as a spectacle, it elicits a sense of tribal identity, the art form is monumental, it functions as a symbol, and its economic dimension is centred on consumption (2005:195). Mitchell's perspective suggests that a logo can simultaneously serve as a tangible representation of identity, described as 'tribal', while also embodying an economic and modern aspect. This represents a broad perspective, raising the question as to how the dimensions articulated by the author manifest or become perceptible in an individual logo.

Territorial logos have a dual characteristic relevant to political analyses, as they embody both permanence and impermanence. If pictures and other visual objects related to local government politics are placed on the axis: permanent-impermanent, then coats of arms are permanent, and ephemeral pictures are impermanent, for example those used in election campaigns. Coats of arms are established (at least in theory) for ever, and do not have a specific "expiration date" (Znamierowski, 2017). Furthermore, within the scholarly discourse on heraldry, an established interpretation exists regarding the presence of a coat of arms, or more precisely, a coat of arms shield in public spaces; it serves as a proxy for authority in lieu of the physical presence of a ruler or official (Belting, 2011). The use of a coat of arms is justified exclusively in locations of particular significance to the city and during events of notable patriotic, historical, or artistic importance (Strzyżewski, 2016). For this reason, coats of arms are not suitable for political analysis. On the other hand, ephemeral images, 'living' for minutes, hours, or most days, for example in social networks in an election context (Smelka-Leszczynska, 2020), only allow for the analysis of trends. For this reason, they are not suitable for fundamental analyses of trends and ideology practice.

Images, in this case, logos of places, are not just a strategic representation of ideology and power relations. They are now an integral, indelible part of their production (Cartwright, Sturken, 2018). Therefore, the authors assume that politicians, acting as decision makers, when establishing the visual identity of a place for a longer period, are guided by their fundamental ideological beliefs. Ultimately, a research question emerges enquiring whether the content of the signatures reflects the *Zeitgeist* or *genius loci* or the political ideology that authorities wish to communicate to the audience of the place promotion.

For the objectives of this article, the term 'signature' (Wheeler, Meyerson, 2024) is used. This notion encompasses the fundamental elements of a brand mark, namely:

- logotype, which refers to the brand name rendered in a standardized format,
- brand mark (graphic symbol),
- brand slogan (tagline, strapline).

The use of the above mentioned 'signature' term is justified in the case of Polish cities: the initial query indicates that in the studied population of 66 cities (they are large cities with county rights), 59 use a logo and of this population, 36 use a signature with a slogan embedded in it.

The study focuses on the relationship between ideology as a foundation for identity-related activities and identity as an ideological undertaking (Lucarelli, 2018a). An examination of the literature, in conjunction with previous empirical research conducted by the authors, facilitated the formulation of the following research questions:

Q1: What neoliberal values, if any, are reflected in the logos and slogans of the Polish LGUs?

Q2: In light of Castell's conclusions (Castells 1999; 2009), a potential tension is evident within logos, situated between the concepts of *Zeitgeist* (neoliberal ideology determining the marketing practices of territorial authorities) and *genius loci* (the specificity of the place and its inhabitants), thus giving rise to an additional research inquiry: Are logos capable of conveying conflicting values?

The theoretical framework of the presented research is based on four distinct pillars. The first pillar refers to the notion of the city as a brand, as revealed by the evolution of place branding and territorial marketing. The second pillar is concerned with the policy processes implemented by local and regional authorities. The third pillar deals with the neoliberal ideology and its influence on the contemporary global economy. The fourth pillar involves the semiotic analysis required to comprehend the content of a logo, which serves as a practical demonstration of marketing practice. These comprise the signifier: the material form of the sign (logo as a sign), and the signified: the concept, idea, or notion invoked in the mind by the material form of the logo content.

To summarize the theoretical framework for the research discussed below, it's important to note that the importance of logos in place branding is ambiguous. Some researchers downplay their importance, while others point out that after a period of significant popularity, the logo's importance in place branding practice diminishes (Govers, 2013; Grunfeld, 2013).

Empirical Research Approach

The method of content analysis was used for the inquiry. It has considerable value in the examination of both verbal and visual messages (Adamus-Matuszyńska, Dzik, 2017). Regarding logos and slogans, the research process is comprised of four stages (Rose, 2016):

1. Logo and slogan identification was carried out by examination of official websites, digital repository of local legal acts (Biuletyn Informacji Publicznej – BIP, in Polish), as well as through participation in municipal offices, social media, and additional promotional materials.
2. Developing categories for coding involves assigning a set of descriptive labels or categories to logos and slogans.
3. The process of coding visual representations involves the application of different categories to the logos and slogans of cities. This procedure was divided into two phases: (3a) the logos undergo coding in accordance with the taxonomies delineated below, and (3b) the classification is subsequently carried out based on the semantic differential as proposed by Boltanski and Chiapello, as detailed in Table 1.
4. Evaluating the outcomes means: formulating conclusions, participating in discussions, and identifying further research considerations.

The endeavour of content analysis is burdened with many theoretical and practical challenges, especially concerning the methodological strategies for sample selection in research settings. Within this framework, the authors arrived at two relevant decisions. Firstly, an analysis of the promotional identities of Polish cities with county rights was conducted and the selection process was directed by the subsequent characteristics of the units for analysis. All cities with county rights in Poland were selected, of which 18 function as the seats of provincial (voivodeship) authorities. These cities are distributed relatively uniformly throughout Poland. They vary significantly in size, from major metropolises to comparatively smaller urban areas. The cities play different roles and present a wide array of offerings. They possess a distinctive administrative status, integrating the responsibilities of both a commune and a county (Piasecki, 2009). Furthermore, these cities manage rather large promotional budgets, as corroborated by existing studies and reports (Stępowski, 2017).

The analytical categories were subsequently formulated on the basis of preceding research conducted by the authors (Beyrow, Vogt 2014; Adamus-Matuszyńska, Dzik 2022; Adamus-Matuszyńska, Dzik 2023; Mabillard et al. 2024; Wheeler, Meyerson 2024) to enhance the potential for comparative analysis. Logos and slogans were evaluated according to the categorization of the content. In circumstances where uncertainty arises, the determinations were guided by descriptions and justifications present within visual identification systems, website descriptions, authoritative statements, and data acquired through personal contacts with officials of a given territorial unit.

In response to the need for comprehensive verbal and visual analyses, three distinct taxonomies were used, each of which was formulated and validated within the realm of place branding. The authors of these taxonomies come from diverse disciplines, including graphic design, marketing, semiotics, and sociology, and employ varying taxonomic criteria to substantiate and elucidate their respective

choices. This approach facilitates methodological triangulation. The following taxonomies have been chosen:

- The taxonomy of logos as articulated by Baur (2013) classifies logos into two principal categories: those possessing a relationship to their coat of arms, which are subsequently divided into more specific subcategories, and those lacking any association with their coat of arms and flags. Considering that municipal heraldry is inherently related to the traditions and historical context of a particular locale (Znamierowski, 2017), this classification provides a distinct demarcation of logos that refer to *genius loci*.
- The taxonomy by Beyrow & Vogt (2014) offers an exceptionally comprehensive classification. It delineates logos into three principal categories: Substance (Ger. Substanz), Presence (Ger. Presenz), and Reference (Ger. Referenz). Within the scope of this study, the subcategory 'social factors' (Ger. Sozialfaktoren) within the Substance group is of paramount importance, as it includes elements such as dynamics and progress. These categories provide an initial indication of symbols emblematic of the neoliberal *Zeitgeist*. In addition, the presence of certain categories, such as heraldry, logotype and initial, in both Baur's and Beyrow & Vogt's taxonomies enhances the potential for cross-verification of the analyzes.
- Mabillard, Pasquier, and Vuignier (2024) present a taxonomy of territorial slogans, categorizing them into tangible and intangible domains. Within the tangible domain, they identify economic and social slogans as distinct categories. In contrast, in the intangible domain, the taxonomy highlights aspects of symbolic construction or identity, including place attachment, traditions and myths, figures associated with location, heritage, and quality of life.

The chosen taxonomies serve as instrumental mechanisms for the analysis of the utilization of visual and textual components in the representation and communication of place identity. They provide diverse perspectives that enable researchers and practitioners to comprehend the strategies that underpin branding and the meanings summarised within these communicative constructs. The varied approaches they adopt towards the subject matter, such as logos versus slogans, or heraldic connections versus broader semiotics, significantly enhance the value of their comparison and potential integration.

In the following stage, the semantic differential was employed in the analysis (Martin, Hanington 2019, pp. 194-196), because semiotic analysis considers the picture as a whole (Mauri, Marsanasco, 2021). The categories are informed by the work of Boltanski and Chiapello (2005). These scholars categorized terms associated with the dominant neoliberal ideology into two distinct groups: those with positive connotations and those with negative connotations (see Table 1 below). Comparison of taxonomic classifications with the semantic differential can be conducted both directly and indirectly. Direct comparison is facilitated by the presence of slogans, which enable verbal analyses. Indirectly, this comparison is enabled by the coding categories that overlap with the terms identified by Boltanski and Chiapello, such as dynamics.

Table 1. Boltanski & Chiapello key words

A positive connotation with the ethos of contemporary capitalism	A pejorative connotation suggesting a lack of alignment with modern realities.
Activity, Projects, Extension of the Network	Unadaptable

A positive connotation with the ethos of contemporary capitalism	A pejorative connotation suggesting a lack of alignment with modern realities.
Connection (new technologies)	Authoritarian, Rigid, Intolerant
Engage, Engaging, Mobile	Immobile. Local, Rooted, Attached
Mediator, Innovator (person)	Status, Security

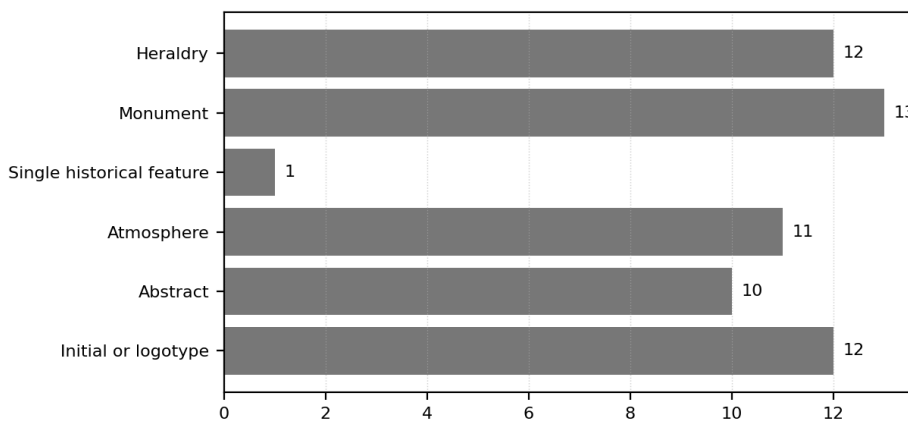
Source: Authors' elaboration based on (Boltanski, Chiapello, 2005)

Key findings

The population under investigation comprises 66 cities with county rights, among which, following the collection of all the researched units, 59 possess a logo and 36 also have slogans. The content of the logos was subjected to an extensive examination, particularly from the standpoint of the categories outlined within each of the three taxonomies. Subsequently, for the ultimate validation of the logo content, a semantic differential formulated by Boltanski and Chiapello was utilized.

In the preliminary stage of the third step (Rose's method of analysis), involving systematic image coding, the logos under scrutiny were categorically organized following the classifications of the three taxonomies. The classifications were meticulously modified to align with the characteristics of the research sample. In particular, categories that exhibited an entry value of zero were omitted, so as a result the signs were classified into 6 categories out of 11 originally indicated by Baur. In the Baur classification, the complex distinctions related to the presence of the coat of arms within the logo, initially divided into three subcategories, were merged into a unified category. Additionally, the logotype and the initial considered as the first letter of the city name is integrated in the Baur taxonomies.

Figure 1. Baur taxonomy in the examined logos of cities



Source: own elaboration

In categorizing signs, Beyrow and Vogt draw on the work of Martina Löw (Löw, 2016). Their decision-making process adheres to two primary guidelines. The first entails the interpretation of the motif, considered the principal graphic theme. The second guideline addresses the form, encompassing elements such as colour, structure, shape, and spatial organization. Visual dominance is the sole criterion used in the decision-making process. The combination of descriptive analysis with visual representation and a thorough discussion of individual signs leads to a

coherent classification of promotional signs. This taxonomy was utilized by the authors to scrutinize the signatures of German cities, and due to its detailed and precise nature, holds applicability for international comparisons.

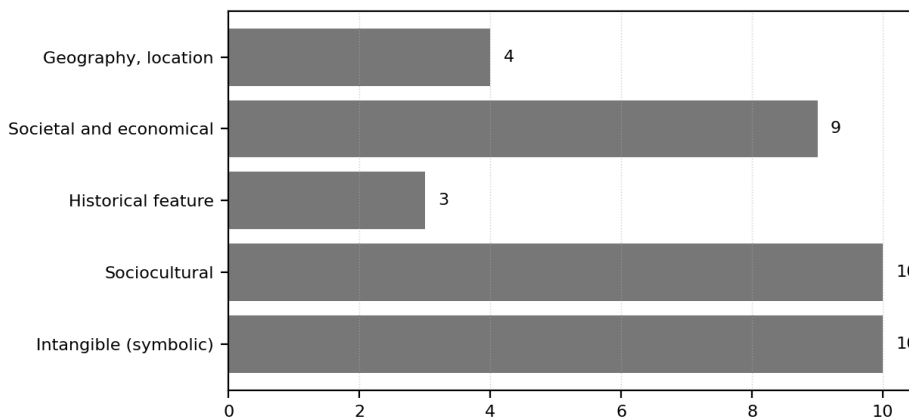
Table 2. The Beyrow/Vogt classification system as applied to the analysed city logos

Thematic group	Symbolic details	Single symbol	Numbers	Sum
Presence	Initials		5	15
Presence	Logotypes		5	15
Presence	Forms		1	15
Presence	The proclamation		4	15
Reference	Heraldry	Coats of arms	7	21
Reference	Heraldry	Heraldic inspirations	12	21
Reference	Cultural assets	Architectural culture	1	21
Reference	Cultural assets	Celebrities	0	21
Reference	Cultural assets	Connecting bridges	0	21
Reference	Cultural assets	Insignia	1	21
Substance	Social factors	Progress	1	30
Substance	Social factors	Dynamic	2	30
Substance	Social factors	Diversity	2	30
Substance	Social factors	Cheerfulness	0	30
Substance	Social factors	Togetherness	1	30
Substance	Places of experience	Castle fortification	2	30
Substance	Places of experience	Palaces	1	30
Substance	Places of experience	Towers	1	30
Substance	Places of experience	Religious buildings	0	30
Substance	Places of experience	Gates	1	30
Substance	Places of experience	Town Halls	1	30
Substance	Places of experience	Springs/Fountains	0	30
Substance	Places of experience	Industrial monuments	1	30
Substance	Places of experience	Specialization	7	30
Substance	Habitats	Skyline and urban scenes	5	30
Substance		Landscapes	0	30
Substance		Bodies of water	1	30
Substance		Environmental schemes	4	30
Substance		Flora and fauna	0	30
Together	Together	Together	Together	66

Source: own elaboration

The study employs the slogan taxonomy advanced by Mabillard, Pasquier & Vuignier (2024: 106). This classification, formulated through comprehensive research and analysis, is applied in this article owing to the substantial quantity of slogans (36) incorporated alongside the logo within the database of symbols relating to Polish cities with county rights.

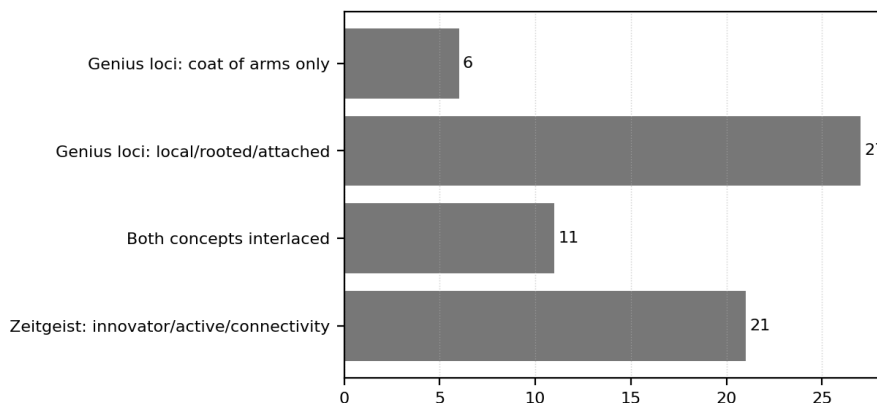
Figure 3. A Typological Examination of Polish Urban Slogans as Defined by Mabillard, Pasquier, and Vuignier



Source: own elaboration

Ultimately, the authors integrated the taxonomies utilized in their analysis with the semantic differential formulated by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005). The resulting outcomes facilitated the classification of logos into three distinct categories: (1) ideologically neoliberal aligned with the *Zeitgeist*, and (2) elements symbolizing the *genius loci*, which underscore locality, rootedness, and an inherent connection to a place. Such a collective comparison allows for the verification of the hypotheses presented in the introduction. The study underscored the necessity to acknowledge an additional category (3) — logos and slogans that simultaneously represent the neoliberal *Zeitgeist* (e.g., mobile) as well as the *genius loci* (e.g., local)—with examples illustrated in Annex 1. The comprehensive findings, which merge the taxonomic analysis with the semantic differential, are presented in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Final results



Source: Own elaboration

The analysis facilitated by the semantic differential indicates that, among the 66 cities evaluated, seven cities solely utilize a coat of arms for their promotional endeavours, thereby aligning themselves with an emphasis on *genius loci*. These cities include Toruń, Gorzów, Tarnobrzeg, Bytom, Gliwice, Piekary Śląskie, and

Nowy Sącz. Additionally, 27 cities employ a logo that highlights genius loci, enabling the deduction that genius loci constitute a central theme in a total of 34 cities. Furthermore, 21 cities distinctly embody the neoliberal Zeitgeist. Importantly, the research finally allowed identifying a third group of territorial symbols. In them, Zeitgeist and genius loci are presented not only as non-contradictory, but also as mutually supporting or even interlaced, in building the visual identity of the LGU brand.

Conclusions

The objective of scrutinizing the logos and slogans of Polish cities through three classifications was to ascertain the presence of elements indicative of the neoliberal Zeitgeist. In addressing the first inquiry posed in this study—namely (Q1), which neoliberal values, if any, are manifested in the logos and slogans of Polish local government units (LGUs)—the findings suggested an existence of such elements. However, it should be highlighted that the number of symbols denoting liberalism and neoliberalism is not substantial. Despite discernible references to the neoliberal Zeitgeist, exemplified by Rzeszów being labelled as the “Capital of Innovation,” comparable quantitative analyses reveal allusions to the genius loci and efforts to amalgamate both narratives.

The research presented herein was inadequate in providing data to answer the second question – Q2: Are logos capable of conveying conflicting values, that is, do neoliberal values conflict within the content of the logo with values deemed important in the locales the logo represents? This suggested the presence of a potential tension within logos between Zeitgeist and Genius loci. Nevertheless, prior research undertaken by scholars has indicated that Polish cities, or more specifically, the Territorial Organizations (TO) responsible for city governance, tend to emphasize the natural or historical resources of locations in their signage, thus making economic or innovative connotations significantly less prominent in the visual portrayal of place identity.

Primarily, these logos and slogans aim to portray a particular region as an amalgamation of tradition and modernity. Initially, it can be posited that in the context of place branding and territorial marketing, local attachment is regarded as a positive attribute, contrary to the perspective provided by Boltanski and Chiapello.

Limitation of the research

The analysis of content, especially in the realm of visual elements such as logos and the nuanced intricacies of slogans, requires a significant degree of interpretative engagement. In spite of the utilization of coding frameworks and taxonomic classification, the subjective interpretations of researchers may influence the categorization and examination of data. This holds consequences for the reliability and validity of the results.

While the authors utilize three taxonomies to address this issue, each taxonomy exhibits inherent limitations. Taxonomies function as structured frameworks; nevertheless, the complexity of reality frequently exceeds these frameworks. Some logos and slogans may not precisely align with the established categories,

necessitating subjective judgment by researchers or potentially overlooking more nuanced interpretations.

The present research focuses specifically on the logos and slogans themselves. While acknowledging the influence of neoliberal ideology, it may not fully address the broader socio-political and economic milieu in which these visual identities are created and employed. Factors such as local history, cultural values, and contemporary events can substantially affect the decisions and preferences of TO, and, consequently, influence the audience's perceptions of logos and slogans. An illustrative example is found in Kutno, where the logo and slogan (The City of Roses) allude to the enduring tradition of a local festival.

The study focuses on Polish municipalities endowed with county rights. While this represents a specific and well-defined group, the findings may not be generalizable to other urban locales, including smaller towns or rural areas, nor to cities in other countries with distinct cultural and political characteristics.

The study presents a temporal illustration of logos and slogans within a specific timeframe. Visual identities are subject to evolution, and the meanings they convey may undergo transformations over time. A longitudinal analysis would provide a more dynamic understanding of how city branding captures shifting ideologies and local identities.

In conclusion, the research predominantly investigates the essence of the logos and slogans. It does not directly assess how these visual elements are perceived and construed by the target audience, including residents, tourists, and investors. Investigations into audience reception may provide valuable supplementary insights.

Discussion and further research

Based on Mitchell's theoretical framework, it may be posited that visual representations, including logos, serve as operational entities (Mitchell, 2005). As Bleiker articulates (2018: 3), images and visual artefacts act as dynamic agents; they possess the capacity to influence political domains to a degree comparable to their ability to reflect such domains. This perspective implies that logos embodying the neoliberal *Zeitgeist* inherently foster political identities (if an LGU portrays itself as neoliberal, it is expected to behave in line with this representation). Conversely, if a logo invokes the concept of *genius loci* (when a local government unit is portrayed as convivial and localized, the imagery implies an absence of external influences such as immigrants and transformation). Empirical research suggests that Polish logos that embody *genius loci* demonstrate a 'timeless' quality, indicating endurance instead of transformation. This contrasts with the notion of change, which, as defined by Boltanski and Chiapello, constitutes the foundational element of the new capitalist ethos. Therefore, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the interrelationship between transformation, project-oriented innovation, the continuity of social connections, and heritage represents a pivotal subject for investigation in the context of territorial branding. However, it is imperative to conduct an analytical examination of images and other visual phenomena.

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Annex 1. Logo examples

City	Logo	Interpretation
Rzeszów		In interpreting city logos, it is notable that in Rzeszów logo, innovation is identified as an aspect of neoliberalism.
Kalisz		The emblem associated with the Kalisz logo incorporates a stylized coat of arms. The corresponding slogan, which lacks translations in other languages, is rendered as: "Add your history." These elements collectively convey a profound sense of cultural continuity.
Katowice		Regarding Katowice, the values articulated in the logo, as derived from the City Visual Identity description, include alternative characteristics (such as openness, change, design, and modernity), metropolitanism, and heritage (which encompasses tradition, history, and regional attributes). All these values are perceived positively, suggesting a conscious integration of contemporary spirit (Zeitgeist) with the place spirit (genius loci).

Source: Own elaboration

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