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HOW TO SEARCH THE PLACE BRAND IDENTITY DISTINGUISHED FEATURES? THE LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS' PERSPECTIVE¹.

Shaping a recognizable image/brand of a particular town/city has become one of the possibilities to achieve the competitive advantage on the contemporary territory market. The main purpose of the paper is to present the categories of place brand identity distinguishing features identified by local stakeholders. The results of the research includes suggestions how to select attributes of urban identity in relation to image management especially in small towns. The research method used in developing this paper was focus group interviews (FGIs) carried out in the period July 2011 - June 2012 in nine towns in Podlaskie region in Poland. The FGIs' participants were moderated towards identifying their towns' identity distinguishing features which seem most attractive from the marketing point of view and could potentially be used by local authorities in the process of place branding. Statements of the participants interviewed have identified two groups of the distinguishing characteristics of the specific nature of the analyzed towns: the emotional attributes and functional attributes. In the first category such as distinguishing characteristics of the town are located like: the atmosphere, the history and local culture, and human potential. The other category consists of: technical facilities, social investment, as well as the strategic location and the products of local companies.

Key word: *place brand, place identity, stakeholders participation*

1. Introduction - from place marketing to place branding

According to Kavaratzis cities all over Europe include more and more marketing techniques and methods in their administration practice and governing philosophy. The transfer of marketing knowledge, however, to the operational environment of cities proves a cause of difficulties and misalignments, mostly due to the peculiar nature of places in general and cities in particular as marketable assets.² It is worth to say, that place marketing is not a recent phenomenon. Places have long felt a need to differentiate themselves from each other in order to assert their individuality and distinctive characteristics in pursuit of various economic, political or socio-psychological objectives. The conscious attempt of governments to shape a specifically designed place

¹ Research study financed from funds for science in the years 2010-2013 as research project No. N N115 155939 *Identification of city identity markers and analysis of the degree to which they are used in city image management in Poland.*

² M. Kavartzis, *From city marketing to city branding: Towards a theoretical framework for developing city brands*, "Place Branding", Vol. 1,1/ 2004, pp. 58–73.

identity and promote it to identified markets, whether external or internal, is almost as old as government itself.³

As Kotler et al. write, places, like products and services, need to be marketed in a sophisticated way. Each city/town must define its special features and effectively communicate its competitive advantages to the “prospects and customers” whose support it seeks. To develop a competitive advantage, places need to consider their past, present and future. They must inventory their strengths and weakness and their opportunities and threats. They must identify those others communities with whom they compete for resources and find ways to differentiate and position themselves to stand out in the minds of their target markets.⁴

Place ‘marketing’ has been implemented in cities’ management process in different ways. Sometimes it uses systematic marketing methods (mostly in tourism and export promotion of manufactured goods by individual producers), sometimes it simply results from inertia and in other instances it is part of broader policies that were not recognised as ‘marketing’ (eg international politics, inward attraction of people and capital, efforts by public servants to assist firms in various sectors in improving their international competitiveness).⁵

At the start of the new millennium, the focus in the debate on place marketing shifted in the direction of place branding. In recent years, the branding of places (and cities in particular) has gained popularity among city officials, illustrated by the development of city brand rankings such as the Anholt-GMI City Brands Index or the Saffron European City Brand Barometer.⁶ Place branding has been described as the current episode of place marketing development. Kavaratzis notes that several aspects of place branding have been dealt with by several disciplines for a very long time, but is only recently that these have been associated so that they can form a separate field of study.⁷

Despite the appearance of a small number of publications on the topic of city branding in the last few years, there is a recognizable gap in the literature with regard to the branding process of cities in general and real case studies in particular.⁸

2. The concept of place branding

Place branding is a relatively new area of research. While not addressing branding specifically, there is an abundance of work in the area of place and city marketing largely from three disciplines: urban development, tourism and marketing management.

³ M. Kavaratzis, G. Ashworth, *Place branding: where do we stand?*, in: *Towards Effective Place Brand Management. Branding European Cities and Regions*, ed. G. Ashworth, M. Kavaratzis, Edward Elgar, 2010, p. 1.

⁴ Ph. Kotler, Ch. Asplund, I. Rein, D. Haider, *Marketing Places Europe. How to attract investments, industries, resident and visitors to cities, communities, regions and nations in Europe*, Financial Times, 1999, p.ix.

⁵ N. Papadopoulos, *Place branding: Evolution, meaning and implications*, “Place Branding”, Vol. 1, 1/2004, pp. 36–49.

⁶ S. Zenker, N. Martin, *Measuring success in place marketing and branding*, “Place Branding and Public Diplomacy” Vol. 7, 1/ pp. 32–41.

⁷ M. Kavaratzis, *From “necessary evil” to necessity: stakeholders’ involvement in place branding*, “Journal of Place Management and Development” Vol. 5, No 1/ 2012, pp. 7-19.

⁸ M. Kavaratzis, G. J. Ashworth, *City branding: An effective assertion of identity or a transitory marketing trick?*, “Place Branding”, Vol. 2, 3/ 2006, pp. 183–194.

Works on city and place marketing in the area of marketing management are fewer and less grounded in empirical research than works in the areas of urban development and tourism.⁹ According to Kavaratzis and Hatch, place branding is a growing academic field and popular practice. The recent proliferation of place branding studies and rising number of place branding consultancies indicate its popularity.¹⁰

Place branding centres on people's perceptions and images, and puts them at the heart of orchestrated activities designed to shape the place and its future. Managing the place brand becomes an attempt to influence and treat those mental maps in a way that is deemed favorable to the present circumstances and the future needs of the place.¹¹

A brand embodies a whole set of physical and socio-psychological attributes and beliefs which are associated with product. Branding is a deliberate process of selecting and associating these attributes because they are assumed to add value to the basic product or service. Place branding attempts to transfer those meanings to the environment of place management and it centres around the conceptualization of a specific place as a brand. That means that for purpose of branding the given place is treated as a multidimensional construct, that generate a unique set of associations with the place in public minds.¹² However we should remember that places are inherently more complex than commercial brands and the notion of places as having or being brands should therefore be seen as metaphorical.¹³

As Parkerson states there is wide agreement that places can be marketed and branded like products, but little empirical research was found to support this assertion or to identify how to brand a city successfully.¹⁴ Just as goods and services are branded, cities are also promoted through branding strategies. Cities have dominant and diverse features which may include their heritage, culture, art or natural resources. These features can be used to create brand images that make geographic locations distinct from one another. The principle that cities and regions can be branded is the premise of place branding¹⁵. Cities are branding and rebranding themselves in order to improve their position as attractive leisure and business tourism destinations, locations for business and places to study and live.¹⁶

According to Kavaratzis place branding is used for both main aims: achieving competitive advantage in order to increase inward investment and tourism, and also for

⁹ B. Parkerson, *City branding: Can goods and services branding models be used to brand cities?*, "Place Branding", Vol. 1, 3/2005, pp. 242-264.

¹⁰ M. Kavaratzis, M. J. Hatch, *The Dynamics of Place Branding: An Identity-based Approach to Place Branding Theory*, "Marketing Theory", 13 (2)/2013, pp. 69-86.

¹¹ M. Kavaratzis, G. J. Ashworth, *City branding...*, op. cit., pp. 183-194.

¹² M. Kavaratzis, G. Ashworth, *Place branding: where do we stand...*, op.cit, p. 4.

¹³ M. Boisen, K. Terlouw, B. van Gorp, *The selective nature of place branding and the layering of spatial identities*, "Journal of Place Management and Development", Vol. 4 No. 2/2011, pp. 135-147.

¹⁴ B. Parkerson, *City branding: Can goods and services branding models be used to brand cities?*, "Place Branding" Vol. 1, 3/2005, pp. 242-264.

¹⁵ E. Kemp, C. Y. Childers, K. H. Williams, *Place branding: creating self-brand connections and brand advocacy*, "Journal of Product & Brand Management", Vol. 21, Iss: 7/ 2012, pp. 508 - 515.

¹⁶ B. Parkerson, *City branding...*, op. cit., pp. 242-264.

achieving community development, reinforcing local identity and identification of the citizens with their place and activating all social forces to avoid social exclusion.¹⁷

Developing effective place branding strategies is considered to be central in drawing together a range of local economic development plans and urban regeneration strategy. It is not surprising, therefore, that places look for distinguishing features of their identity, which will allow them to build an image attractive for those around them and also for residents¹⁸. Based on their identified place identity distinguished features, individual places attempt to create their own brands which, according to the Kavaratzis concept, constitute their desired images communicated through a variety of tools and resources such as popularly known buildings, structures and other components of urban environment, infrastructure, organizational and administrative structures as well as behaviours of persons responsible for urban planning, of local leaders and visionaries.¹⁹

Although, formally, place branding is a task of local authorities, recently increasing attention has been devoted to participatory approach to place branding, involving different groups of internal stakeholders of places²⁰.

3. Participation of stakeholders in designing the place brand identity

An important part of creating an effective branding strategy for a place or destination involves examining the needs of internal stakeholders. Internal stakeholders might include local businesses, government and residents. Without buy-in from stakeholders, place branding strategies are likely to fail.²¹

Braun et. al distinguish three types of roles that can be attributed to the residents in the development of a place brand: residents as integrated part of place brand, residents as ambassadors for their place brand and residents as citizens²². These roles may be complemented by a fourth one, relating to the participation of the residents, in particular the place's socio-economic leaders (local stakeholders) in the process of designing the place's identity unique distinguishing features.²³

Kavaratzis indicates three reasons for increased interest of participation of local stakeholders in place branding. The first is that the place branding is a public management activity and such activities need to have support from the public for various social and political reasons. Another reason for arguing in favour of increased stakeholders' participation in place branding is the recent turn towards a participatory branding in general. The third reason for the increased importance of the involvement of

¹⁷ M. Kavaratzis, *From city marketing to city branding...*, op.cit., pp. 58-73

¹⁸ E. Glińska, M. Florek, *In searching for town brand distinguishing features – local leaders' inner perspective*, "International Journal of Academic Research. Part B", 2013, Vol. 5, nr 4 (2013), pp. 200-205.

¹⁹ M. Kavaratzis, *From city marketing to city branding: Towards a theoretical framework for developing city brands*, "Place Branding", Vol. 1, No.1/2004, pp. 58-73.

²⁰ E. Braun, M., Kavaratzis, S. Zenker, *My City – My Brand. The Different Roles of Residents in Place Branding*, "Journal of Place Management and Development", Vol. 6 (1)/2013.

²¹ E. Kemp, C. Y. Childers, K. H. Williams, *Place branding...*, pp. 508 – 515.

²² E. Braun, M., Kavaratzis, S. Zenker, *My City – My Brand...*, op.cit..

²³ E. Glińska, M. Florek, *In searching for town brand distinguishing features – local leaders' inner perspective*, "Actual Problems of Economics", 2013, (forthcoming).

stakeholders in place branding has to do with the advancement of digital and online technologies. This is a factor that has dramatically emphasized the significance of stakeholders and has opened new avenues for place branding.²⁴ Place branding is not solely a task for the public sector, but rather a collaborative undertaking of the place's key stakeholders. This will necessitate a strong thread of public – private partnership. The local government has worked as a facilitator and catalyst with an understanding that the success of tourism depends on the receptiveness of the host community.²⁵

4. Aim and methodology of own research

In the context mentioned above, the main aim of this paper is to present the categories of place brand identity distinguishing features identified by local stakeholders in the process of designing the desired image among external and internal audience of analysed towns.

The empirical material used in this article constitutes a diagnosis of identity distinguishing features of nine towns located in Poland, in Podlaskie Voivodship (Province): Grajewo, Hajnówka Kolno, Łapy, Łomża, Siemiatycze, Sokółka, Wysokie Mazowieckie and Zambrów, as viewed by their socio-economic leaders. The towns are Podlaskie Province's all towns with population over 10,000 which have not yet developed documents entitled "town promotion strategy". Eight towns can be classified as small towns with the function of local growth centres. Only Łomża, the largest of the towns, with a population of 60 thousand, can be considered a supra-local centre. Podlaskie Province is located in the north-east of Poland. In borders with Lithuania and Belarus. It is a mainly agricultural region with dynamically developing food sector (primarily milk, meat, poultry and grain processing) as well as light industry, timber industry, construction industry and engineering industry.²⁶ Podlaskie Province's towns were selected for the survey taking the assumption that the whole region may be considered a specific "laboratory" enabling Polish towns' diagnosis in terms of image management based on determined identity distinguishing features. Such a diagnosis is possible as the region includes not only typical tourist towns but also towns particularly oriented towards attracting investors and towns constituting "small urban centres serving surrounding rural areas". The research method used in developing this paper was focus group interviews (FGIs) carried out in the period July 2011 - June 2012. The FGIs covered between 7 and 16 local leaders invited according to lists compiled jointly with the analysed towns' municipality employees responsible for their town promotion. The respondents represented the towns' different fields of life including culture, education, business, local associations, the media, church parishes, etc.

The FGIs' participants were moderated towards identifying their towns' identity distinguishing features which seem most attractive from the marketing point of view and could potentially be used by local authorities and cooperating institutions in desired

²⁴ M. Kavaratzis, *From "necessary evil" to necessity: stakeholders' involvement in place branding...*, op. cit., pp. 7-19.

²⁵ S. Vasudevan, *The role of internal stakeholders in destination branding: Observations from Kerala Tourism*, "Place Branding and Public Diplomacy", Vol. 4, 4/2008, pp. 331-335.

²⁶ http://www.wrotapodlasia.pl/pl/region/informacje_ogolne/; entered in March 2012

town-image management. The interviews were recorded and their transcripts were analysed using methods typical for empirical material collected with the use of qualitative data collection techniques. During the interviews, projection techniques were used allowing to obtain the synergy effect typical for discussions with groups of respondents.

5. Research results and discussion

The participants of the focus group interviews spoke about the attributes/ competitive advantages of the individual towns from the point of the possibility of using them in the towns' marketing/ branding activities. In each group, the discussions were very lively and consisted in common identification of those features which make a specific town distinct from others, and based on which a recognisable local brand could be built.

Literature on the subject of place marketing, in particular relating to tourist destinations, indicates a classification of local brand association categories which are divided them into functional associations and symbolic/ psychological associations. In the works of some authors, a third group is also mentioned, known as experiential associations. In the context of destination brand images, Hankinson²⁷ suggests that brand associations are more likely to fall into two categories of functional and ambience/ experiential. This study also found evidence of symbolic associations, but these appeared to be less important. Also Echtner and Ritchie²⁸ provide a conceptual model of a place image also based upon the three categories of brand associations, individual attributes versus holistic impressions, functional versus psychological characteristics and common versus unique characteristics.²⁹

The division of urban brand attributes into psychological elements and functional elements related to the concept of levels of benefit sought by users of a specific brand. Functional benefits include all possibilities of conducting activity and gaining experience, ensured by a given place to the residents, businesses and visitors. Emotional (experiential) benefits include feelings offered to individual groups of users of a given town's offer. At the functional level, the individual addressees of the promoted town brand are looking for such elements which can make their lives easier, more convenient, more efficient and interesting. The emotional level, in turn, refers to the feelings and experiences that can be shared by persons who select a given town as a place to live in, to visit or to conduct business activity.³⁰

Although the above division is most often used in the process of marketing research aimed at identifying how a given town is perceived by the general public, the classification may also be useful in the process of planning a town's desired image and

²⁷ G. Hankinson, *Destination brand images: a business tourism perspective*, "Journal of Services Marketing" 19 (1)/2005, pp. 24-32.

²⁸ C.M. Echtner, J.R.B. Ritchie, *The Measurement of Destination Image: An Empirical Assessment*, „Journal of Travel Research” 1/1993, pp. 3-13.

²⁹ G. Hankinson, *Place branding theory: a cross-domain literature review from marketing perspective*, in: *Towards Effective Place Brand Management. Branding European Cities and Regions*, ed. G. Ashworth, M. Kavaratzis, Edward Elgar, 2010, p. 22.

³⁰ J. Pogorzelski, *Praktyczny marketing miast i regionów*, Oficyna a Wolters Kluwer business, Warszawa 2012, p.55-57.

of determining its unique distinguishing features based on which the image will be built. The survey conducted among stakeholders of the towns in the Podlaskie Province helped compile a list of attributes which may become key distinguishing features of the individual towns' identities in the process of building recognisable small-town local brands. By joining the results obtained for each of the analysed towns, a collective list of features was compiled. The features were then grouped into broader categories which included: the town's atmosphere/mood, human potential, history and local culture, strategic location, local company products, public facilities, technical facilities and facilities for investors. To simplify somewhat, it may be concluded that the first three categories contain psychological attributes relating to the realm of emotions experienced by the receivers of the town's brands, while the others contain functional attributes relating to the rational realm of the town offer "users".

The first of the above mentioned categories included attributes which can be called "atmosphere/ mood of the town". Given the size of the analysed towns, it is not surprising that the category included such elements as: peacefulness, quietness and safety, which undoubtedly are advantages of small towns. The category also included such attributes as multiculturalism, charm of the eastern border region, the atmosphere of a border-line town, and closeness to nature (characteristic of the Podlaskie Province towns surrounded by forests and nature reserves). It was also emphasised that the small size of the towns ensures better possibilities of implementing social initiatives.

In general, in each of the analysed towns the participants of the interviews stated that the town's specific dimension, based on which the town's recognisable brand could be built, is the local community i.e. the human potential. In particular, attention was paid to hospitality of local residents but also to their cleverness and capability. Emphasis was placed on local human capital i.e. mostly young people having remarkable achievements in different fields, and already well-known in the region and in the country.

The group interviews also resulted in searching for the towns' distinctive features in the town's history and cultural assets, both tangible and intangible ones. Interestingly, examples of events in local history, as well as local traditions and customs, were indicated as town's distinguishing features more frequently than local architectural monuments and other historical objects.

Among the town's attributes suggested by local stakeholders as the town's potential unique distinguishing features was strategic location, understood in different ways: as the town's location along main transit roads, the location near the eastern border of the country, or the location along roads leading to places highly attractive for tourists (lakes, river valleys, etc.). This category also included the administrative aspect related to the town's location at the border of two provinces.

Quite often, the participants of the interviews, representing different fields of the towns' lives, also pointed to the products of local companies or even to the companies themselves, as factors distinguishing their place of residence.

Among the towns' attributes identified by local leaders were also typical functional features such as public facilities (different types of infrastructure and public services) which have impact on the local standard of living. Among them, the most extensive group were social facilities such as access to an extensive cultural offer, sports and recreation offer and educational offer. Access to this offer would not be possible without the attributes classified under another category named technical facilities (including sport and leisure infrastructure,

cultural institutions, as well as the condition of the municipal technical infrastructure: roads, water and wastewater networks, etc.). A separate category were facilities for investors, including industrial areas and parks developed for potential entrepreneurs intending to undertake business activity in the town.

Table 1. Categories of distinguished features of the town's brand identity according to local stakeholders

Emotional (experiential) attributes			Functional attributes				
Town's atmosphere/mood	Human potential	History and culture	Strategic location	Products of local companies	Social facilities (cultural, sports, recreation and educational offer)	Technical facilities (recreation, sports and culture-related infrastructure and technical infrastructure)	Facilities for investors
peacefulness quietness safety positive climate for social initiatives modernity connected with local patriotism multiculturalism agricultural region's climate charm of the eastern border region richness of traditions and cultures of two regions feeling of being located on the border closeness to nature	hospitality of local residents cleverness of local residents capability of local residents differentiated cultural activities of individual residents of groups (dancing, singing, painting, sculpture, crafts)	rich history symbolic monuments of history traditions and cultures of national minorities local dialects local cuisine places of religious worship	location along main transit roads location on the border of two provinces a starting point on the road to places of tourist interest	local brands and products of local companies known in the country and abroad (diary products sector) innovativeness of local companies, particularly SMEs industrial traditions of the town	extensive cultural offer extensive offer of high-quality cultural services local culture groups, theatre and music groups, and related events popular across the country and in the region high-quality educational offer education on all the levels of education	sports and recreation infrastructure and recreation areas parks well-developed technical infrastructure	land for investment projects industrial parks

Source: own analysis.

Taking into account the division of the attributes proposed by Echtner and Ritchie³¹ the figure 1 was prepared. It presents " perception map " of different categories of attributes identified by the focus group participants divided them according to two criteria (of the three proposed by these authors): functional attributes - psychological, as well as common attributes - unique. Such a graphical representation of groups of attributes which can show the attributes of what category it is easier to find some that are unique to the town, such as the well-known historical local hero, local cuisine (from the category "history and culture"), a multicultural charm (from the category "atmosphere of the city") or products of local companies. In turn, all the facilities offered by the town, such as technical or targeted specifically for investors can be offered by all urban centers.

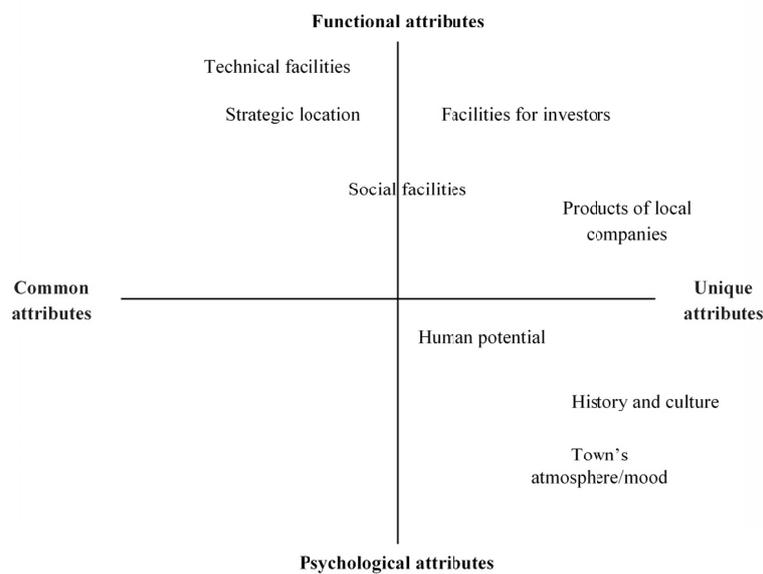


Figure 1. Categories of distinguished features of the town's brand identity according to local stakeholders presented in terms of the concept of C.M. Echtner, J.R.B. Ritchie

Source: own analysis on the base of the concept presented in the paper: C.M. Echtner, J.R.B. Ritchie, *The Measurement of Destination Image: An Empirical Assessment*, „Journal of Travel Research" 1/1993, pp. 3–13.

6. Conclusions

The involvement of the town's socio-economic leaders in the process of building the local brand may bring numerous benefits. Their participation in the process has made it possible to adopt a multi-dimensional approach to the towns' strong points which can become a basis for building positive distinctiveness from other towns. It should be noted that the participants of the study placed great emphasis on finding such distinctive features of their towns, which would make it possible to build emotional associations with the place. This is of great importance as in the process of town brand building,

³¹ C.M. Echtner, J.R.B. Ritchie, *The Measurement of ...*, op.cit., pp. 3–13.

particular attention is paid to attributes which are unique and difficult to copy by other competitive towns.

It should be emphasized that it is rare for any town had equally developed areas mentioned above "product" of the city. This theorem applies even more accurately to small towns in the outermost region. A town that offers fresh air, friendly and hospitable people, attractive environment is often characterized by low availability of transportation. Town offering interesting attractions can be characterized by high levels of pollution and low levels of public services. In turn, the town relating to the sentiment to its traditional building can encourage tourists, but at the same time discourage investors interested in modern technologies. Therefore, in the hunt for features of the city to build its recognizable brand is worth to take into account the specificity of the target group, which is the most important from the point of view of the direction of the town.

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Streszczenie

Kształtowanie rozpoznawalnego wizerunku miasta jest jednym ze sposobów osiągania przewagi konkurencyjnej na współczesnym rynku terytoriów. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest zaprezentowanie kategorii wyróżników tożsamości marki miasta zidentyfikowanych poprzez lokalnych interesariuszy. Wyniki badań zaprezentowane w opracowaniu zawierają sugestie dotyczące sposobu selekcji atrybutów tożsamości miejskiej, w relacji do zarządzania wizerunkiem zwłaszcza małych miast. Metodą badawczą wykorzystaną w artykule stanowią zogniskowane wywiady grupowe przeprowadzone w okresie czerwiec 2011 – czerwiec 2012 w dziewięciu miastach w woj. podlaskim. Uczestnicy wywiadów byli moderowani w kierunku zbudowania listy wyróżników tożsamości swoich miast, które wydawały się im najbardziej atrakcyjne z marketingowego punktu widzenia i które można byłoby wykorzystać w procesie budowy marki lokalnej. Wypowiedzi uczestników wywiadów pozwoliły zidentyfikować dwie grupy cech wyróżniających specyfikę analizowanych miast: atrybuty emocjonalne i atrybuty funkcjonalne. W pierwszej z nich pojawiały się takie kategorie cech wyróżniających miasto jak: atmosfera, historia i kultura lokalna, a także potencjał ludzki. W drugiej natomiast znalazły się: udogodnienia techniczne, społeczne, inwestycyjne, a także strategiczne położenie i produkty lokalnych firm.

Słowa kluczowe: marka miejsca, tożsamość miejsca, uczestnictwo interesariuszy w procesie kształtowania marki miejsca.

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