

## FORMING OF POLISH REGIONS' VISUAL IDENTIFICATION SYSTEM. A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH APPROACH

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**Purpose:** This paper aims to verify and present the diverse opinions of respondents about the logo of Polish voivodeships, obtained in the process of qualitative research and to evaluate them critically.

**Design/methodology/approach:** Research using a qualitative approach. The authors used the technique of a standardized in-depth interview. As a tool, an answer sheet was used, which was completed by the respondents themselves. A deliberate sample selection was used based on the criterion of the occupational category.

**Findings:** This paper contains the developed conclusions based on the analysis of the respondents' opinions. Includes vital considerations on the appropriate design of visual signs to promote regions to audiences. The conclusion relate to the symbolism used in the logo, colors, and consistency between individual elements.

**Research limitations/implications:** The respondents were full-time, extramural, and postgraduate students. The issue raised in the paper requires empirical research and confirmation among the other groups.

**Originality/value:** The paper contains a collective analysis of opinions on all logos of Polish regions.

**Keywords:** place visual identity, regions' visual system, visual identification system.

**Category of the paper:** Research paper.

### 1. Introduction

Managing territorial units in Poland more often sees the need to conduct coordinated, planned, and consistently implemented activities to promote the region (Sekuła, 2015), which can be defined as a cultural or historical territory and is a consequence of an administrative division (Pietrzyk, 2000). Place marketing practices are applied in cities, regions, and countries

of all sizes (Alux et al., 2015), and even in cross-border areas such as the Oresund region, which includes Denmark and Sweden (Falkheimer, 2014). It can be noticed that while large territories manage their brand, pointing its attractiveness, in smaller areas, the importance of territorial marketing activities in the implementation of various development goals is also emphasized (Alux et al., 2015).

An adequately designed visual identification system helps to create and maintain a clear image of a place. This system is an essential part of the marketing communication enabling the region to present its identity and uniqueness (Łuczak, 2010). In communication activities, visual elements are ahead of verbal methods of informing about a brand or product (McQuarrie and Phillips, 2008). This is especially important in the local government sector due to the often limited budget allocated to promotion. An adequately presented logo is the function of a general transmitter of information about the identity of a given place (Riezebos, 2003). The appropriate logo of a territorial unit should allow the recipient to quickly identify, remember and, above all, influence his decisions related to the use of the place. The key to constructing a proper and effective system of visual identification is understanding the local values possessed by a given area, which at the same time determines the originality and uniqueness of ideas related to the graphic presentation compared to other units (Wahyurini, 2014).

In numerous studies related to territorial marketing, visual identification issue appears relatively rarely, especially about regions. They are much more diverse than cities, so it is more difficult for them to create a coherent set of symbols and distinguish marks with which it will be possible to show their individuality (Raszkowski, 2009). Apart from exceptions, there is also a lack of studies that would show the effects of activities in this area (see e.g. Daszkiewicz, Waniowski, 2011).

Assuming that the logo is the key visual distinguishing feature, this paper aims to verify and present the diverse opinions of respondents about the logo of Polish voivodeships, obtained in the process of qualitative research and to evaluate them critically.

## **2. Research assumptions**

For many years, all Polish voivodeships have actively used logos in their promotional activities, allowing them to distinguish a place and emphasize its specificity (Zdon-Korzeniowska, 2012). Most of the systems identifying Polish voivodeships were designed primarily to target tourists. Planned and coordinated promotional campaigns accompanied the introduction of each voivodeship logo, but part of the logo was changed after a few years. Figure 1 shows a graphic presenting the current logo of 16 voivodeships.



**Figure 1.** Logos of Polish voivodeships in 2021. Source: own compilation based on <https://contentsolutions.pl/hejty-i-propsy-czyli-najbardziej-emocjonujace-projekty-logo-polskich-miast-i-województw/>.

The research used a qualitative approach, focusing on three primary areas: exploratory, diagnostic and image research (Dyjas-Pokorska, 2004). Due to the aim of the research, the authors of this paper focused on the image aspect and one of the four dimensions of the brand (Aaker, 1996), namely the brand as a symbol, trademark, logo. To gather opinions, the technique of standardized in-depth interview was used with the use of a tool in the form of an answer sheet completed by the respondents themselves. Respondents were presented with the logo of each of the 16 Polish voivodeships in alphabetical order and asked to evaluate, present associations and individual opinions about each of them. A deliberate sample selection was used based on the criterion of the professional category. The respondents were full-time, extramural, and postgraduate students. A total of 320 answer sheets were collected, 100 of which were rejected after the initial review. The remaining 220 sheets were subject to the final analysis, based on which the conclusions were developed. All of the sheets selected for the study had a complete number of responses. The vast majority of respondents focused on classifying and evaluating each of the 16 logos in the following three dimensions: the accuracy of reflecting the specificity of the region and enabling unambiguous identification, arousing the recipient's desire to know or visit a given place, and a subjective attitude towards the aesthetics

of the logo. A smaller number of respondents referred to each component of the logo, expressing their opinions on, for example, the size, font style, signet size, or the colors and shades used. Based on the collected opinions and obtaining a general assessment of the respondents' attitudes, it was also possible to compare the perception of the logo with the original intentions of the authors of the projects.

### 3. Results

The logo of the **dolnośląskie** voivodeship consists of a logotype presenting the name and a signet representing three squares, which were initially intended to symbolize three areas of tourism characteristic of the region (the heritage and history of the voivodeship with numerous castles and palaces, forests, and mountains as well as spa tourism) (Dolnośląskie ma logo turystyczne, 2011). Designing a logo that would promote Dolny Śląsk region as a whole was a challenge because the research conducted earlier (Daszkiewicz, Waniowski, 2011) showed that a significant number of respondents (over  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the total) associate the voivodeship mainly with its capital and facilities located in Wrocław.

People assessing the logo of the Voivodeship most often paid attention to its main element, which was a signet consisting of three icons. One of them shows the castle, which, in the respondents' opinion, was often associated with numerous buildings located in Dolny Śląsk. The symbol of the fountain was understood ambiguously, more often associated with the Wrocław Pergola and the fountain in the Market Square, and less often with what the creators intended, i.e., with spa springs. Some respondents did not have any associations with the signet referring to specific objects, apart from defining the symbols presented in them. Some of the respondents' positive opinions regarding the logo concerned that the icons in the signet may to some extent be associated with the resources of Dolny Śląsk. However, they are too universal to be unequivocally used to promote the specificity of this region. People positively evaluating the logo considered that it represents various tourist attractions that any visitor can encounter. The graphic design was assessed negatively by the majority of respondents as careless, unprofessional, unrepresentative, and even infantile.

The inspiration to create the logo of the **kujawsko-pomorskie** voivodeship was the regional costume and the kujawiak, one of the most famous Polish folk dances. According to the people responsible for the region's branding strategy, the dance rhythm expresses features that are a metaphor for the values presented by the region – “peace, impulse, power” (Założenia..., 2016). However, these associations were mentioned by few respondents. The vast majority did not express any unequivocal reflections on colors, which was why they assessed them negatively, as not referring to the specificity of the voivodeship. Tested persons pointed, for example, to space, spilled paints, a police siren, game pieces. The vast majority of opinions

assessed the colors used as incomprehensible, unnatural, chaotic, and, above all, too difficult to interpret. The combination of colors was found to be quite aggressive, in some opinions evoking concern. Only a few respondents suggested that perhaps the authors' intention was to present regional colors in the survey. Most expressed the opinion that the logo does not suggest what can be found in this region, it does not represent any keynote, and, above all, does not encourage visitors.

The logo of the **lubelskie** voivodeship consists of a signet showing the first letter of the name of the voivodeship and the slogan "Lubelskie – taste the life." The signet showing the red L letter dominating the logo was assessed by most respondents rather positively, as being eye-catching and memorable, but not flashy. The font used to present the name and slogan was judged to be well-chosen in terms of graphics, and the colors were aesthetic. The slogan, associated with the developed catering industry and local products, was also positively assessed. Most of the respondents decided that the logo encourages visitors, focuses on promoting regional specialties, seems friendly and positively influencing. However, there were too frequent and robust connections with the well-known brand of pasta, Lubella. The main objection concerned the lack of elements pointing directly to the region's specificity, which means that it cannot be identified with the voivodeship represented.

The authors' intention of the visual identification system of the **lubuskie** voivodeship was to give it the broadest possible character. The colors used reflect the natural values of the region. Also, they symbolized vitality and expansion (green), openness (blue), and cleanliness (white). The promotional slogan should evoke associations with the West, i.e., modernity, innovation, and dynamic development. This is how the respondents assessed the logo as modern and traditional at the same time. The shape of the signet was most often associated with a highway leading through the fields, which emphasizes its dynamic character. The colors of the signet, due to the natural shades, were strongly associated with nature, primarily with the sun, water, and green areas, which evoked positive feelings. A significant number of respondents decided that the colors used reflect the specificity and resources of the voivodeship and reflect its natural character. The slogan "Lubuskie is worthwhile" (*org. Lubuskie warte zachodu*) was received very positively, and the respondents pointed to its twofold message - as encouraging to visit and pointing to the geographical location of the region. The terms most often used to evaluate the logo were: pleasant, aesthetic, relevant, encouraging.

The logo of the **łódzkie** voivodeship was designed in the shape of a clothing label, symbolizing the region's textile traditions, and these were also the most frequent associations among the respondents. However, for most respondents, the signet ring was incomprehensible, and the colors used were assessed as gloomy and depressive. The respondents almost unequivocally stated that the logo does not fulfill its essential functions. It does not indicate the region and strongly does not encourage visitors. The logo was found to be bland, overwhelming, poor, graphically weak, and not memorable. Opinions also suggested that the logo perpetuates the stereotypes attributed to the Łódź region because it brings to mind associations related to

dirt, neglect, and poverty. Critical opinions also pointed to the very idea of the project as utterly inadequate for promoting the region among tourists or external investors.

The logo of the **małopolskie** voivodeship, selected in the competition, assumes evoking associations with essential advantages of the region in the recipients. The two main advantages are the beauty of nature and cultural heritage. The signet symbolizes the mountain ranges and the river. Also, it resembles the shape of the historic church towers and the royal crown.

A signet in shape similar to the letter M was most often associated with mountains, which, in respondents' opinion, directly referred to tourist attractions, the specificity, and the region's location. Many opinions referred to the colors described by the respondents as pleasant, modern, attractive, intriguing, and memorable. There were also voices of people for whom these colors were too flashy and too varied. However, the respondents most often associated the colors of the signet with the diversity and openness of the region. The logo was assessed positively by most of the respondents; the opinions about legibility, quick associations, aesthetics, and the relevance of the idea prevailed. The respondents characterized them as modern, simple, but specific, encouraging them to visit the voivodeship and enabling unambiguous identification with the region.

The logo of the **mazowieckie** voivodeship consists of a red signet representing the name of the voivodeship, the first letter M of which is modeled on the shape of a heart, and a slogan directly related to the symbol: "Heart of Poland." In the research, the first letter of the logotype, representing the name of the voivodeship, was unambiguously associated with the heart, which may evoke positive emotions and optimism. The shape and design of the heart were sometimes associated with Valentine's Day or the annual national charity campaign "WOŚP." Respondents pointed out that the logo was kept in vivid white and red colors and often pointed to national and patriotism associations. The slogan "heart of Poland" was also positively assessed. However, the logo was unambiguously associated with Warsaw and not the entire region. Thus it does not encourage people to get to know other places outside the capital. Due to its structure (name and promotional slogan), this logo in no way reflects the specificity of the entire mazowieckie voivodeship.

Consisting of a logotype and a signet, the logo of the **opolskie** voivodeship shows the Piast Tower in Opole and decorative ornaments referring to plant motifs and the slogan "Blooming Opolskie." People who recognized the shape of the Piast Tower expressed the opinion that placing the building, which is characteristic of the voivodeship's capital, is a good idea, as it is a representative symbol of the voivodeship, famous for its many castles and palaces. For the respondents who did not recognize this tower, the logo did not seem characteristic of this voivodeship. The slogan "Blooming Opolskie" was understood by the respondents variously and ambiguously. The respondents guessed that it could figuratively indicate the region's dynamic development, be synonymous with the term "sustainable development" or symbolize an area that cares about a clean environment and promotes ecology.

**Podkarpackie** voivodeship is most often associated with the Bieszczady Mountains. However, the people responsible for preparing the strategy for the visual identification system of this region also tried to use the aviation traditions that make it unique. The slogan “Podkarpackie – open space” is directly related to the strategy of building the image of the region, according to which Podkarpackie offers development opportunities and prospects for both investors and residents (Zdon-Korzeniowska, 2012).

In the vast majority of respondents' opinions, the signet was associated with mountainous areas, which was assessed as accurately reflecting the character of this region. Some respondents pointed to the arrow located in the graphic, most often interpreted as a symbol of the region's development. In the opinion of the respondents, the colors used were consistent, accurately selected, associated with nature, freedom, and cleanliness of the environment. Less numerous opinions criticizing the signet used in the logo referred to the lack of creativity and too far-reaching universality. The slogan “Open Space” was often associated with a phrase aimed more at investors than tourists or residents. As a whole, the respondents considered the logo to be aesthetic and modern, but not very attractive from the tourist point of view, which, despite reflecting the specificity of this region, does not encourage visitors and getting to know this part of the country better.

The logo of the **podlaskie** voivodeship is a bison-shaped signet, consisting of about 300 squares of different colors and the slogan “Podlaskie powered by nature.” The animal used in the logo symbolizes this land, and small, colorful squares reflect the diversity of the place in terms of heritage, history, landscapes, and customs.

All respondents showed interest in the silhouette of the bison, and the vast majority of them associated the animal as a symbol of the Białowieża Forest. The very use of the bison silhouette was assessed by the respondents positively and ingeniously as an ideal symbol allowing for simple and obvious identification of the logo with the voivodeship. Presenting the bison, consisting of small squares and the colors used, met with explicit criticism. According to the respondents, the idea of using pixels distracted from the main symbol, and their density was overwhelming and chaotic for the audience. The bright colors that filled the bison graphic in the signet were assessed as too flashy, abstract, tiring, and hindering the perception of this logo. The respondents assessed the slogan “powered by nature” positively about the specificity presented by the region. At the same time, many opinions pointed out that it was inconsistent with the signet. According to the respondents, the unnatural colors contrasted the slogan pointing to green and clean areas inhabited in large part by animals. Consequently, despite the elements reflecting the specificity of the voivodeship, the logo was assessed as illegible, irritating, flashy, dissuasive, and discouraging from visiting the region.

The logo of the **pomorskie** voivodeship consists of a logotype showing the name of the voivodeship and a signet in the form of an exclamation mark preceding it. In their opinions, the respondents often pointed to the exclamation mark in front of the inscription. They assessed this procedure as illogical or even incorrect for grammatical reasons. The signet did not evoke

any associations with the region among the respondents; there were opinions among some people that placing the exclamation mark emphasized the importance of this region for its inhabitants or the country. Among the respondents, associations related to the colors of the signet appeared rarely. Individual opinions indicated that the colors might evoke sunset or amber. The respondents also paid attention to the type and color of the font used in the logotype. The most common associations were sea waves due to the flowing shape and dark blue colors and handwriting, which in turn was reminiscent of holiday postcards. The overall logo was assessed negatively by the respondents. The allegations concerned mainly with the lack of creativity and the failure to use elements or symbols associated with the voivodeship. According to the surveyed people, the logo does not encourage visitors, does not promote the region, and makes it challenging to identify.

In the signet of the logo of the **śląskie** Voivodeship, there are four characters stylized with the letter "S" in various colors and the slogan "Śląskie. Positive energy". The colors symbolize different types of tourism. Yellow means religious tourism, green – active, blue – cultural, and black – industrial. The logo promotes, above all, the tourist potential of the region, which is commonly associated mainly with mines, steel mills, and factories.

Despite using the logo of the Śląskie Voivodeship in four colors in the signet, the respondents paid particular attention to the black color associated with coal and numerous mines occurring in this voivodeship. A few opinions mentioned associations with the other three colors considered standard and universal, usually associated with nature, sun, and water. Some respondents pointed to the form of lines placed in the signet in the shape of a wave or the letter "S," which was associated with the first letter of the name of the voivodeship. In several opinions, the waves were associated with negative associations, e.g., with smog. Among the respondents, several times, there was an opinion regarding the slogan "Positive energy" that it is ambiguous due to the heavy environmental pollution associated with the mining industry. In most opinions, the logo, thanks to the black color, reflected its identity and industrial character. The recipients admitted that it allows for easy identification with the region. A significant part of the respondents appreciated the logo's simplicity, pointing to its legibility and ease of remembering. However, there were also negative opinions that the logo does not indicate what tourists can expect when visiting the region.

There is controversy around the logo of the **świętokrzyskie** Voivodeship related to the symbolism used in it. The signet ring shows a witch flying on a broomstick, which refers to local legends telling about witches' rallies on Łysa Góra. This is also how the respondents interpreted it. People who were aware of the famous legend regarding the Witches' Sabbath on Łysa Góra, associated this symbol directly with the region and assessed it as a good and inventive distinguishing feature; strongly pointing to the Świętokrzyskie Mountains. For the rest of the respondents, the symbolism of the signet was incomprehensible, and the image of a witch on a broomstick, in some opinions, was negatively associated with the villain, which caused concern. Few people also noticed that the shape of the graphics took the



form of the first letter of the name of this region. Some of the respondents also referred to the inscription showing the name of the voivodeship; in their opinion, the archaic shape of the letters is consistent with the signet referring to old legends. In most opinions, the logo was assessed as funny, mysterious, standing out from the rest, ambiguous, prompting a more profound interpretation and willingness to understand the message, and containing hidden symbols. Opposing opinions were expressed mainly by respondents for whom the symbol of the witch was incomprehensible, which, in their opinion, did not reflect the character of the voivodeship.

The logo of the **warmińsko-mazurskie** voivodeship consists of a logotype presenting the name of the place and a signet whose shape shows a sailboat in blue, green, and yellow. The colors reflect the resources characteristic of the region - the richness of nature, especially lakes and forests.

The analysis of respondents' responses assessing the logo of this voivodeship contained the most significant number of convergent opinions and associations. The respondents pointed to the image of a sailboat, which brought to mind vacation and carefree time. The graphics were found to be simple, legible, relevant, and eye-catching. According to the respondents, the colors used in the signet were vivid and associated with the sun and water. The few negative opinions referred mainly to the font style used to present the name of the voivodeship, which, according to the respondents, lacked delicacy and lightness and therefore did not fit the signet. Among the respondents, opinions were often expressed that the logo, through associations, strongly encourages quick visits to the region, rest, fun, and recreation and allows for precise identification with the voivodeship.

The logo of the **wielkopolskie** voivodeship is a signet made of four letters in yellow, blue, red, and green, forming the abbreviation of the name (Wlkp) and the slogan "great history, great adventure." Respondents assessing this logo pointed to the signet ring showing the abbreviation of its name. However, the idea was assessed as not very creative, not depicting the place and its specificity, and suggesting only the name. The form of the signet was associated with spilled paint, blots, children's drawings. Opinions regarding the colors used in the signet were divided. Some respondents criticized the colors used, claiming that the colors do not harmonize with each other, are chaotic, random, and do not characterize the region. The rest assessed them as modern, often associated with urbanity, active life, and youth. Opinions about the slogan in the logo appeared less frequently; among the people who assessed them, it was considered lofty, which can be addressed to people of different ages and having different expectations. The respondents pointed to a dissonance between, in their opinion, an infantile signet ring and a profound slogan that encouraged visitors to visit. In general, negative opinions prevailed due to the lack of specific associations and reflections related to its reception.

The **zachodnio-pomorskie** voivodeship logo reflects the region's strategy, in which particular emphasis has been placed on goals related to increasing investment attractiveness and promoting a modern economy. It shows a graphic of the symbol "OK," the purpose of which is

to evoke positive associations related to the region's development. Some of the respondents interpreted it in this way. However, most respondents did not present their associations or try to see their sense, claiming that its concept was incomprehensible. Some people referred to the technological context by comparing the logo to, for example, companies supplying the Internet, dealing with electronics, or introducing innovations. There were associations with the Windows and Microsoft logos. Attention was even paid to the way the signet was made, comparing the squares placed in it with post-in sticky notes or computer screens. The combination of colors used in the signet was usually assessed as pleasing to the eye, vivid, but universal and standard, not approximating the region's shape, landscape, or specificity. As a whole, the logo consisting of a logotype showing the name of the voivodeship and a signet ring was assessed as too technical, inadequate to the region's specificity, with an idea difficult to understand.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Creating a positive visual identification system of the voivodeship is more complicated than the corresponding action related to the city. It is more challenging to find distinguishing features characteristic of the entire region. In many cases, the respondents drew attention to it, emphasizing that the logo is illegible, incomprehensible, or based on a symbol characteristic for the voivodeship's capital rather than for the entire region (e.g., opolskie voivodeship) or a particular part of it (świętokrzyskie voivodeship). The most positive opinions related to the logo, which contained characteristic distinguishing marks facilitating quick identification with the entire region (mainly lubuskie and warmińsko-mazurskie). Therefore, one should strive to construct such a logo that in its message will cover the entire voivodeship, not only its capital.

Since it is impossible to find one distinguishing feature, graphic elements based on its name and not on characteristic objects dominate in numerous identification systems of Polish voivodeships. Among them, the logo of the mazowieckie voivodeship evoked the warmest associations. At the same time, the respondents had a much worse opinion about the logo of the pomorskie voivodeship. There was also an exclamation mark in the latter case, which the respondents found abstract, incomprehensible, and therefore quite extreme associations. This also applied to the zachodnio-pomorskie voivodeship with a stylized symbol OK, which for most of them turned out to be incomprehensible and inadequate to the character of the voivodeship. Focusing on the motives related to the region, but poorly associated, also does not give good results because only a few respondents associated the colors of the kujawiak as a distinguishing feature of the kujawsko-pomorskie voivodeship, emphasizing the lack of any relationship between the logo and this region.

The respondents quite often assessed the colors used in the construction of the logo. They emphasized that the right choice of colors can strengthen positive associations and evoke additional ones. Some recipients wanted to understand them and give them a specific meaning, positive (especially Mazowsze) or negative (kujawsko-pomorskie and łódzkie). The respondents generally rated too aggressive combinations of too many colors (Podlasie and Wielkopolska) as chaotic, accidental, or overwhelming.

Each element of the logo should be consistent and not raise contradictions in the mind of the recipient. Simplicity and unambiguity prevent the respondents from looking for hidden meanings. In this context, the logo of the łódzkie voivodship draws attention to the tradition related to the textile industry, which, according to the respondents, only strengthens negative stereotypes related to this region.

Some distinguishing features were also assessed as not very original, poorly showing the specificity of a given region (dolnośląskie, pomorskie). It was also pointed out, especially concerning the wielkopolskie voivodeship, to the illogical relationship between an infantile signet ring and a good slogan. Both of these elements must work together because only together do they form a coherent whole.

Some of the respondents' answers also showed that there is not always a complete correlation between the intentions of the creators of the visual identification system and the way of receiving the message, which may be different from the assumptions. In such cases, after more detailed research, a modification of the logo should be considered, which has been done by several Polish voivodeships in recent years, namely podlaskie, małopolskie or kujawsko-pomorskie.

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