

## RESEARCH ON EMERGING NEW NARRATIVE IN PLACEBRANDING – WHERE SANCTUARY FACING FOOTBALL

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**Purpose:** Paper presents preliminary studies on city's placebranding in a face of a new storytelling factor. The text provides research on the phenomenon of new storytelling shaping the image of a place in the face of a placebranding already established in the consciousness of its inhabitants. The general aim of the research is to initial verification of an hypothesis of interactions between nationally recognizable success of a football club on Częstochowa city's perception change, which so far has a strongly dominant attribute as the world religious center.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The results of an empirical study were obtained to describe the potential for the transformation of a city's image from a story rooted in and related to its religious function to a new narrative. Survey interviews and in-depth interviews were used. Theoretical issues of place branding based on the sports story were addressed.

**Findings:** Identification of the existence of potential synergies between possible parallel place brand narratives. Preliminary evidence of differences in the perception of different groups of the city's community. It was observed in the face of the lack of cooperation and conflict towards the position of the football club in the city that there were no symptoms of the management of a new narrative by the city administration.

**Research limitations/implications:** A limitation of the study is the use of a relatively small non-representative research sample.

**Practical implications:** There may be practical implications in terms of recommendations for conflict management and place brand management for the city government scene.

**Originality/value:** This article is one of the few (or only) studies addressing the topic of rebranding a place from a religious function to a possible football narrative.

**Keywords:** Placebranding, narrative, city, football, religiosity.

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

### 1. Introduction

We live in a world of competing narratives. An important dimension of this is competition not only between economic entities, but also between geographical areas and settlement structures. An important contemporary dimension of competition is the creation of suitable

images, connotations or attractive stories. We see this today in the form of business stories involving ecology, equality or social responsibility. Cities and regions also create and develop their own stories when competing for resources, including investment, residents, tourists. As Owsianowska notes, “nowadays, narratives are treated as one of the intangible values of a place - alongside image, identity, atmosphere, genius loci” (2014, p. 8). Stories create a brand of place (placebranding) which is an important dimension of territorial strategies. “Place branding is the management of place image through strategic innovation and coordinated economic, commercial, social, cultural and government policy” (Moilanen, Rainisto, 2009, p. 7). “Branding is everywhere and everything is a brand.” (Richelieu, 2018, p. 354). Research on the phenomenon of placebranding has been developing rapidly since the late 1990s. At the same time, research on the importance of sport in placebranding and its impact on local communities and the perception of a city is quite abundant, especially in western scientific literature (Kobierecki, Strożek, 2017). Zenker (2014) and Richelieu (2014, 2018) distinguish between three objectives of placebranding: build brand awareness, improve the place’s image in the mind of target consumers and stakeholders as well as to promote the location to different target markets. At the same time, for historical reasons, many cities and geographical places have an embedded brand and a set of associations, perceptions and stereotypes both within the community of inhabitants and among the external environment. As Marczewska notes “stereotypes are a component of the linguistic image of the world and the linguistic-cultural code, they are inevitable and indelible...” (2018, p. 283). Sometimes there are factors that change the direction of the narrative, moving away from stereotypes or building a new story.

The subject of the research presented in this paper is an attempt to answer the question about the possibility of a different perception of the city emerging in relation to the traditional socio-culturally rooted image and brand. The general aim of the research is to initial verification of an hypothesis of interactions between nationally recognizable success of a football club on Częstochowa city’s perception change in the consciousness of its inhabitants, which so far has a strongly dominant attribute as the world religious center. Moreover, the aim of the studies is to analyze situations of conflict and cooperation occurring in this context.

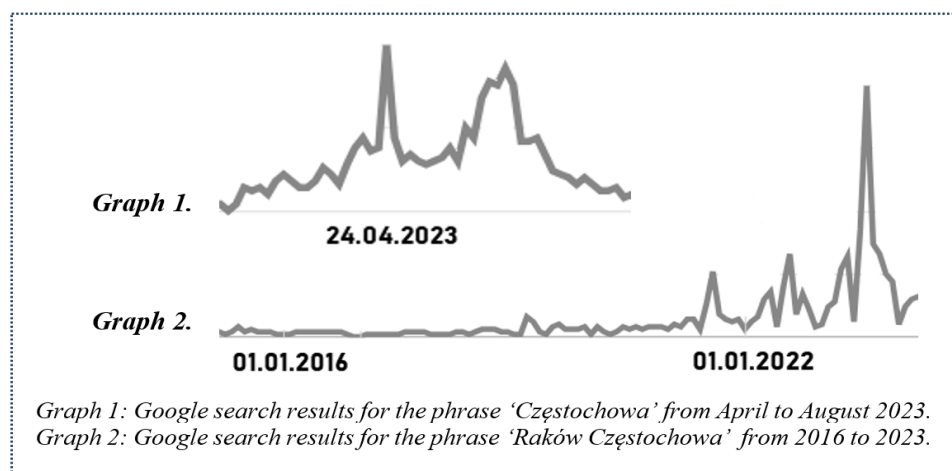
The ingrained image of the city Częstochowa is related to the perception of this place as a pilgrimage center. What interesting things have happened in the last years in the perception and image of the city? Perhaps a new factor of city perception has appeared. The city has become perceived in a new perspective because of the unexpected success of the local football club. While different contexts can feed into a place's branding strategy, such as history, architecture, gastronomy, sport can also be a significant lever for many image transformations. This is due to the emotional resonance of sport, its ability to engage the conversation with large audiences and high social emotion. Sport can become an important factor in the branding of a place (city) in the case of football such a process or activity is called ‘a sport team platform’ (Richelieu, 2018, p. 357). Hognestad mentions that in the world of club football, the tradition of a club, city or region is an important component in the symbolic construction of identity

(2009). As Melosik notes “in a world of dispersed values, football provides stable identifications” (2015, p. 323) Cities are increasingly striving to use a variety of sporting events and activities to create, change or re-fresh their image, promote it and, above all, for the purpose of activating the local economy (Bosiacki, Śniadek, 2012). It is observed that large cities support clubs that hold the greatest significance for the local community, and their successes, commented on by the media, simultaneously become strong promotion for the city. This case study of Częstochowa can lead to an identification of a process of place brand transformation or an emergence and manageability of new city-forming processes, as well as the conditions for effective management of conflict and cooperation, both in the business, image and social context. The research methodology will be based on survey questionnaires, in-depth interviews. Apart from the introduction, the study consists of a section describing the research context and the research methods used, based on a non-representative survey and in-depth interviews, a section on the presentation of the research results, discussion section and summary.

## 2. Research background and methods

Kotler et al. (1993) argues that the image of a place is a synthesis of beliefs, ideas, and impressions in the subjective relationship of people to that particular place, thus constituting a process of social perception. In this case Częstochowa, being a significant hub of global religious devotion, is epitomized by the Catholic Sanctuary of the Black Madonna. The sanctuary (Jasna Góra), serves as a complex religious and mythological construct, of utmost importance to Poland's history, symbolizing a key of national mythology. It also ranks among the world's foremost pilgrimage destinations, alongside places like Lourdes and Fatima. The comparative analysis underscores a notable trend, that European religious centers are typically found in small towns. These smaller urban areas, such as Fatima in Portugal and Lourdes in France have a population of just over 13,000 and are visited by 6 million and 5 million pilgrims/tourists respectively per year. While Częstochowa has a population of over 200,000 and receives over 4 million visitors (International la Croix, 2023). Minor European pilgrimage centers are primarily geared towards accommodating pilgrims, with their shrines serving as the primary—if not sole—urbanizing force. Conversely, the case of Częstochowa presents a starkly different scenario. Here, we encounter a multitude of simultaneous urbanization processes and various urban potentials. The city experiences a broader spectrum of city-genic activities, extending beyond accommodation and devotional trade to encompass a range of industrial and service sector investments. Nevertheless, the religious function remains the main connotation and brand of the city. Last years a new, a new narrative has emerged, the city has become popular in the media and public discourse because of the Raków Częstochowa football club. Figure 1 below shows the volume of searches in Google for the

phrase ‘Częstochowa’ from April to August 2023 and Google search results for the phrase ‘Raków Częstochowa’ from 2016 to 2023.



**Figure 1.** Google search results for the phrase ‘Częstochowa’ and ‘Raków Częstochowa’.

Source: Author’s compilation based on Google Trends data (17.05.24).

It can be seen that the number of searches about the club was higher between the end of April 2023, when the club won the national championship, and the end of August 2023 (the peak of the pilgrimage period in the city), (Figure 1, Graph 1). At the same time, it can also be seen that there has been a spike in interest in the club in search results since the year of gaining promotion to the highest football league in the country (Figure 1, Graph 2). The history of football clubs in the city is not linked to successes and well-known stories so far. The origins of the football club, who changed the story can be traced back to 1921, where the Racovia Sports and Football Club was established in the workers' district of Raków on the initiative of the PPS and converted in 1924 into the Robotniczy Klub Sportowy (RKS) “Raków” (Gazeta..., 2021). With the exception of participation in the final of the Polish Cup in 1967, it did not achieve sporting success (Kowalski, 2015). The situation changed after the club was taken over by a local businessman from the IT trade industry. The story of x-kom began in 2002 when a 24-year-old graduate of the Częstochowa University of Technology opened the a small computer shop in the center of Częstochowa. As time passed, more shops emerged, but a pivotal moment for the company was its expansion into online sales. Today, enterprise stands as one of the largest stores in the Polish internet landscape, boasting revenues of 2.5 billion PLN (press.x-kom, 2024).

The empirical research used a methodology based on questionnaire surveys and their analysis, as well as qualitative research consisting of in-depth interviews. Survey research was conducted on a non-representative sample of Częstochowa city residents in the period November 2023 to February 2024. In the research, the respondents were divided into two groups. The first group consisted of people expressing an active interest in the sports club through regular attendance at football matches and participation in thematic groups on social media (group I, 78 people, responses received - 50). The second group consisted of people

expressing no active interest in the football club and never attending a match of the club football team (group II, 92 people, responses received - 50). The qualitative research was based on performing four in-depth interviews. Two interviews were conducted with club personnel, while the remaining two interviews were conducted with representatives of the city hall and Częstochowa city council. To complete the picture of the phenomenon under investigation, an analysis of selected media news during the period of May 2023 to April 2024.

### 3. Results

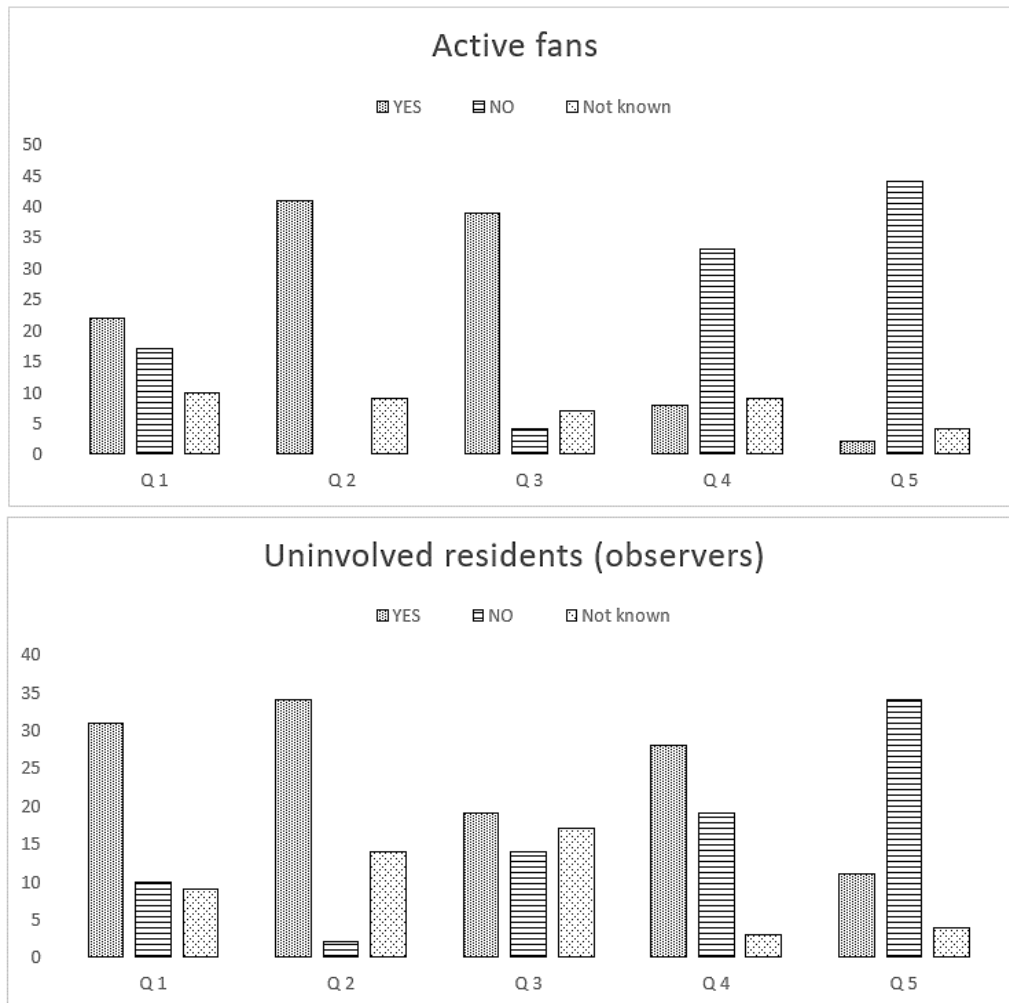
The survey was based on the questions (Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4, Q5) presented in the following table (Table 1), which concerned respondents' opinions on the possible process of changing the city's image due to the emergence of a new football story. In addition, the questions had to do with respondents' perceptions of a possible conflict between the city's existing brand as a religious center and the potential for building a capital of cooperation and trust within the city's community.

**Table 1.**  
*Questions in survey*

Question 1 (Q1)	<i>Do you think that the sporting success of the club Raków Częstochowa contributes to changing the image of the city in the context of its religious function?</i>
Question 2 (Q2)	<i>Do you think such a change of image could have a positive impact on the city's development?</i>
Question 3 (Q3)	<i>Do you think the city's football narrative should be strengthened?</i>
Question 4 (Q4)	<i>Does the city's football narrative compete with or threaten the religious function of the city embedded in the inhabitants' consciousness?</i>
Question 5 (Q5)	<i>Do you think the increasing interest of local residents in the football club has an impact on building an environment of cooperation and trust in the city?</i>

Source: author.

The aggregated results of the responses received, divided into two groups of respondents, that is those expressing an active interest in a sports club through regular attendance at football matches and participation in thematic groups on social media (*Active Fans*) and the second group were those expressing no active interest in a football club and never attending a match of a club football team (*Uninvolved Residents, observers*), are presented in the figure below (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Results of the responses received, divided into two groups of respondents.

Source: author.

Differences can be noted in the perception of changing the image of the city in the context of its religious function (Q1), where more people who are not regular fans of the club indicate a possible change of image towards the religious function of the city in relation to active fans. Perhaps this is due to the prevalence of conservative attitudes in the football fan community. For question two (Q2) on the change of image could have a positive impact on the city's development, respondents of both groups express similar opinions. The answers to question three (Q3) on strengthening the city's sporting story indicate that more people in group one (active fans) consider strengthening the football story to be justified. This attitude is most likely due to a greater identification with the sporting narrative of this group.

There are clear differences in the answers to question four (Q4) regarding the city's football narrative competing with or threatening the religious function of the city. Active fans indicate rather no such relationship, while uninvolved observers recognize that the football brand can compete with the religious brand. A possible explanation for this distribution of responses lies in the assumption of a greater attachment to conservative, right-wing and religious values among football fans. In the answers to the last fifth question (Q5) concerning cooperation

capital and trust, we also notice differences between the two groups of respondents. Active fans express a more critical stance towards cooperation in the city environment compared to uninvolved observers of the football story. An explanation for this difference in the perception of cooperation capital could be the bitterness and high dissatisfaction with the situation of the football infrastructure for the club. Obviously, active fans attend matches so the lack of infrastructure is more noticeable for them.

In this section of the paper, the following is a summary of the qualitative research in the form of interviews and a review of media opinion. Interviews with football club activists (In 1, In 2) show that the position of the football club in relation to the local community is very well recognized and that the club creates a positive story that is well perceived. At the same time, respondents do not see any phenomenon of competition with the traditionally established brand of the place as a religious center, “maybe one day the pilgrims will also be interested in the club?” (In 1), “it might be interesting to have two stories” (In 2). At the same time, the club's activists see the club's role as fostering trust and social bonds, especially among children and young people. The biggest problem growing into a major barrier to growth and development is the lack of adequate technical infrastructure, especially the stadium and training facilities. The football community perceives this issue as a downright ideological problem or a personal conflict between the club and the city authorities. It seems to be some kind of personal conflict, it cannot be rationally explained (In 2). Respondents highlight the lack of atmosphere and cooperation capital “I don't understand why there is this conflict after all it is obvious that it will work for the benefit of the city and the residents” (In 1). At the same time, they raise the political issue by recognizing that many activities related to the club on the part of the city and party circles always have a political context “there is no dialogue, “if there is it only during municipal elections like recently or parliamentary elections” (In 1).

Respondents representing the city (In 3, In 4) milieu point to the difficult cooperation with the club because of what they perceive as the club owner's desire to make a financial profit at the expense of the city budget “we have a huge problem with the lack of cooperation between the city and the club” (In 3). At the same time, they point out that there are possible solutions to the stadium problem “after all, there are public-private partnership solutions” (In 4). However, they claim that there is a very difficult and complicated financial set-up, which could affect the city's finances. On the part of the city authorities, there is no problem of a conflicting city brand, the respondents claim that there is a possibility of parallel narratives building the brand of the place “narratives can be complementary”, “after all, it can coexist nicely” (In 4). Thus, from the interviews performed, it appears that the emergence of a new narrative about the city related to the popularity of the football club among inhabitants can be a complementary brand to the religious connotations of the city. At the same time, the biggest and so far unresolved problem is the conflict between the city authorities and the club. In this case, the strategic expectations are very different. The club expects explicit and significant help from the city in the development of sports infrastructure, while the city considers such contribution

as support for the business venture such as managing a football club. The main topic of media reports is the conflict over the construction of a new stadium for the football club or the possible redevelopment of the existing inadequate facility. It is apparent in media news stories that there is a lot of resentment and open conflict between the football supporters' community and the city authorities. "the current city mayor..., is not welcome at Raków matches. In the magistrate's office we hear that he doesn't go to the stadium if he has to listen to the whistles" (Polsat sport, 04.03.2024), "they challenged him during the championship fete and dedicated an offensive banner to him" (Sportowe fakty, 14.05.2023). At the same time, this subject is becoming a field of political game "one of the most important topics during the election campaign in Częstochowa was the construction of a new stadium" (Sportowe fakty, 22.04.2024). What emerges from the research is a picture of, on the one hand, a lack of perception of the development of the football story as any kind of threat to the established brand of the place, but on the other hand, a serious and deep conflict between the club and the political leadership of the city. It was observed in the face of the lack of cooperation and conflict towards the position of the football club in the city that there were no symptoms of the management of a new narrative by the city administration. It appears that the mixed research procedure applied allows conclusions to be drawn, but it should be stressed that the author is aware of the unrepresentative nature of the sample and treats these results as a preliminary stage in the study of these phenomena.

#### **4. Discussion**

The research procedure carried out, based on a non-representative research sample and in-depth interviews, obviously does not allow the results to be extrapolated to the population as a whole. Therefore, the conclusions presented in this article are based on subjective probability (Babbie, 2004; Chybalski, 2017). However, it seems that the results may be considered valuable as they represent a certain trend of the phenomenon related to the possibility of emergence or change of perception of the city image in the face of the appearance of a new factor. Bosiacki and Śniadek cite studies demonstrating the significant role of football in the perception of the city of Poznań, similarly Samura proves the significant role of the football club in the perception of the city. Daszkiewicz's research confirms the strength of associations of the football club as an image strength of the city of Poznań (2012). Among press publications about Poznań, sport-related topics predominate (39% of all publications), followed (more than twice as low) by information related to business (16%). (Rogała, 2011). As Samura noted (2012) Poznań is associated with "Lech", Warsaw with "Legia", Białystok with "Jagiellonia", Wrocław through "Śląsk", Kraków through "Wisła", and Łódź through "ŁKS" and "Widzew" (Samura, 2012, p. 159). Hognestad mentions that in the world of club football,



the tradition of a club, city or region is an important component in the symbolic construction of identity (2009). As Melosik notes 'in a world of dispersed values, football provides stable identifications' (2015, p. 323) Cities are increasingly trying to use a variety of sporting events and activities to create, change or 're-fresh' their image, promote it and, above all, for the purpose of activating the local economy (Bosiacki, Śniadek, 2012). It is observed that large cities support clubs that hold the greatest significance for the local community, and their successes, commented on by the media, simultaneously become strong promotion for the city. Cities are increasingly striving to utilize various sports events and activities to create, change, or "refresh" their image, promote it, and above all, for the purpose of local economic activation (Bosiacki, Śniadek, 2012). Furthermore, it is recognized that the city's sports brand can influence the growth of social capital and collective identities (Kellett et al., 2008; Misener, Mason, 2009). Yet, the success of a local or the national team would fall under "collective identities" (Kavetsos, Szymanski, 2009), which refer to "the sense of belonging to a social group or community reflecting self-categorization with positive attitude and important self-concept in a social context" (Lee et al., 2013, p. 27). Either way, it seems that the empirical data and theoretical research presented are an interesting contribution to the scientific discussion on the possibility of transforming the image of place in the context of different narratives.

## 5. Summary

As Michalowski notes, "myth-making constructs play an important role in building the identity of cities" (2019, p. 28). Sports activities are an excellent way to shape myths and brand a place. An image is the way a territorial unit is perceived, the opinion about it, its image in the minds of the inhabitants. The activities of sports clubs can be a very effective form of promoting a city, especially when they achieve success on the national or international stage. Skillful use of good sporting results or clubs with positive associations for the promotional purposes of the territorial unit may increase interest in the city and, consequently, the number of tourists or companies willing to invest in the area. It seems that in the case of the studied problem of potential change or modification of the place brand of the city of Częstochowa, the biggest challenge is building culture of cooperation between local actors and trust capital. Referring to the main objective of the research, it can be said that a link was noted between the emerging new football story and the formation of the image of the place in relation to the long-established religious connotations of the city in the consciousness of its inhabitants. In addition, it was found that the presence of two narratives is not in competition with each other and can be complementary and reinforce the place brand. The research presented in this paper does not respond completely and convincingly the question of whether it is possible to transform the narrative about the city on the basis of a new factor constructing the image of the city.

However, it seems that posing such a question is an interesting contribution to the discussion on managing place identity and the image and perception of the city, although it is rather a preliminary identification of the problem. At the same time, it seems that the presented preliminary research results may be of significance in the construction of a city strategy in the context of placebranding management. Either way, it seems that further in-depth research in this subject is required in the future.

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