

Mazovia brand awareness among corporate customers: implications for local authorities

Katarzyna Młotkowska

SGH Warsaw School of Economics, Warszawa, Poland, and

Izabela Kowalik

*Department of International Marketing, Warsaw School of Economics,
Warsaw, Poland*

Abstract

Purpose – The aim of the study was to determine the region brand's strength by measuring the awareness of the regional brand elements, associations and the perception of the region's promotional activity in the corporate customers' group.

Design/methodology/approach – To obtain the necessary data, this study conducted computer-assisted web interviewing on a sample of 151 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) registered in the Mazowieckie Voivodeship and engaged in furniture production and food and beverage production. Statistical data analysis included Pearson and Spearman's rank correlation and chi-square tests.

Findings – The survey showed a high number of brand associations with the region of Mazovia, but the level of brand recognition was low. The awareness of the region's logo among SMEs shows the strongest correlation with the belief that promotional activities increased the scope of company operations. Moreover, this evidences the perceived utility of the brand among those customers.

Practical implications – The regional authorities should invest more in the frequency of promoting the region among certain strongly engaged user groups to increase their brand awareness level. Furthermore, local authorities should try establishing an umbrella brand that would cover several sub-brands promoting separate industries in the region.

Originality/value – To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first study in Poland that focused on regional branding effects among entrepreneurs and using a quantitative method. The relationship between the studied entrepreneurs' willingness to use the Mazovia brand and their range of operations indicates that some enterprises already enjoy greater trust thanks to the brand, which increases their loyalty toward the region.

Keywords Region brand, Brand strength, Corporate customers, Place branding

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

A strong brand benefits both the buyer and the brand owner (Witek-Hajduk, 2011, p. 39). In the case of a place brand, the benefits of building a strong brand should concern its owners, namely, local authorities, who thus can increase the effectiveness of marketing activities and create a competitive advantage for the place and its customers. The recipients of a strong place brand gain the certainty of making the right decision to choose a specific location, along with additional benefits such as the sense of prestige resulting from living, conducting



economic activity or visiting a famous place (Kavaratzis, Warnaby, & Ashworth, 2015; Kotler, Haider, & Rein, 1993). Mazovia brand awareness

Positive associations between a region and attributes favorable for its economic or social development should trigger brand utility benefits. In the case of residents, the improvement of a region's image and the sense of pride among residents are called the "show-off effect" or the "programmed optimism effect" resulting from the events that happen in the place and its positive associations. Thanks to appropriate positioning, centers can use the acquired image as a competitive advantage and the subject of their specialization (Gondim Mariuttia & Moura Engracia Giraldi, 2021; Szromnik, 2011). The benefits of building a strong place brand also influence entrepreneurs: a brand inspires confidence in making the right decision to choose a specific location. The brand minimizes the risk of negative choices and gives additional benefits, such as the feeling of prestige resulting from running a business (Dudek-Mańkowska & Balkiewicz-Żerek, 2015).

Therefore, research on regional brands' strengths can benefit local authorities, resident firms and citizens. In post-transition economies, the study of regional brands remains scarce – including that of B2B customers' perceptions – despite the numerous marketing activities of territorial authorities (Chikhladze, Valishvili, & Gabelashvili, 2018; Dudek-Mańkowska, 2009; Glińska, 2016, 2017; Goranova & Vasileva, 2015; Hudak, 2019; Konecnik & Petek, 2012). Nevertheless, we should analyze these customers' perceptions, because defining the weak points of territorial brands may help local governments focus their marketing efforts. Thus, this study seeks to discover region brand strength by checking how the brand of one of the largest Central European regions is perceived among local firms, and whether they think the region's promotion brings any benefits to their activities.

2. Region brand: a theoretical framework

The place brand is a set of associations in the mind of the consumer, based on the visual, verbal and behavioral expression of a place, which is made by communication, values and design of the place (Zdon-Korzeniowska, 2012, p. 3). Whereas a region brand is a set of related visual and verbal elements, as well as all the values and benefits that are associated with the region and that are attractive to the recipient (Ollins, 2004).

The region brand is designed to attract investors and tourists, ensure an increase in national and international political influence, establish a more productive partnership with other territorial units and introduce the place-of-origin effect (Aichner, 2013; Motsi & Park, 2020). It can also cause a kind of local pride among the territory's inhabitants (Pegan, Vianelli, & De Luca, 2020). These aspects make the brand an indispensable tool in the hands of local authorities. Thus, their goal typically is not only to just have a brand but also to build a strong brand.

The brand's strength is determined by such factors as brand image, perceived brand quality, brand awareness, the loyalty of brand buyers and other assets like trademarks or patents (Aaker, 2002, p. 7). Brand strength combines with the market position of a given brand. Brand strength can also be defined as the strength of buyers' demand for a given brand compared to competing brands (Kall, 2001, p. 42; Murphy, 1990). Place brand strength and attractiveness are attributed to its appealing personality (Glińska & Rudolf, 2019).

Building a strong brand is possible by building high brand awareness among a broad audience. Awareness of the existence of a brand allows buyers to form an opinion about the brand. Thanks to brand awareness, one may project a brand image in the minds of its recipients. At the same time, both brand awareness and its image make its buyers appreciate the quality of the brand (Dudek-Mańkowska & Balkiewicz-Żerek, 2015; Florek & Janiszewska, 2015; Florek & Kavaratzis, 2014; Kim & Chao, 2019; Zenker, 2014), which leads to its positive recognition by potential investors. Thus, we will examine these elements further in this article, which considers companies as customers of the branded places.

The place brand can be associated, among others, with branded product categories or with benefits of an emotional or functional nature. In the case of the region, its brand can be associated with its specialization in some industries, which the region promotes (Kowalik, 2012). It also could be done by co-branding. Place co-branding is based on the interactive relationship among brands (Lucarelli, 2018). The co-branding approach reflects a process in which a reciprocal relationship between two or more brands is activated to obtain a certain level of benefits connected to the interests of each brand (Helmig, Huber, & Leeflang, 2008). Moreover, a strong regional brand can be an umbrella brand for the local enterprises' brands. Building an umbrella place brand is a form of cooperation between producers located in a particular territory and a local government unit, with a view of establishing an integrated brand that encompasses a significant number of products and services, seeking to promote local products and the entire territory (Vlasova & Kulikova, 2017). An umbrella place brand must obtain a synergistic effect of promoting products and services that minimize expenses in building a new brand, advertising new products and entering a new market (Feger & Carl, 2010). Some researchers stress that the main objective of a region's umbrella brand is to harmonize and order regional images (Huang, 2015). The resulting brand image is one of the most important criteria for choosing a brand both in the minds of buyers and also in those of investment companies' decision-makers (Papadopoulos, Ibrahim, De Nisco, & Napolitano, 2018).

Brand awareness in the market means buyers' ability to recognize the brand, which also means an association with specific experiences and associations (or their lack). There are levels to brand awareness: from complete unfamiliarity to utter partiality. The literature usually foregrounds four basic types of brand awareness: brand unfamiliarity, assisted brand awareness, spontaneous brand awareness and top-of-mind awareness (Rossiter, 2014).

Next to brand value and brand loyalty, brand awareness is also an element of the brand equity construct (Kavaratis & Ashworth, 2005, p. 509). Brand equity is defined as the extent and nature of consumer knowledge about the brand, namely, the balance of positive or negative associations, the degree of recognition of the brand's distinctiveness and the consistency of these variables over time. Moreover, brand equity includes extra benefits enjoyed by the consumer beyond a product's bare utility value. In turn, such equity comprises two elements: brand value (the associations themselves) and brand awareness (the strength of the recognition of such associations). Brand equity simplifies the choice for consumers and enables brand recipients to rapidly identify products whose supply is guaranteed, controlled for quality and stable (Bose, Roy, Alwi, & Nguyen, 2018; Hankinson, 2010). With solid equity, it is easier to survive crises, sudden changes in consumer behavior or aggressive attacks from competitors by established brands (Taranko & Chmielewski, 2014).

Another element of a strong brand is perceived quality, which should be understood as buyers' subjective assessment of the quality assigned to products with the specific brand (Witek-Hajduk, 2011, p. 49). Moreover, brand quality is the brand's ability to provide more satisfaction to its buyers than alternatives. In the case of place brands, the associations with high-quality products can evoke high place brand value, contributing to the formation of brand equity. The brand of the place may be associated, among other things, with branded product categories or with benefits of an emotional or functional nature (Hanna, Rowley, & Keegan, 2021), thus checking these associations provides knowledge about brand strength.

The loyalty of a strong brand's customers results from a positive brand image, perceived high quality and brand "use." The phenomenon of brand loyalty is highly complex, but buyers' loyalty to the brand is often associated with the repetition and frequency of choosing a brand. Loyalty is manifested by the attachment to a given entrepreneur/organization, by the repeatability of purchases or by combining these two aspects (Reitsamer & Brunner Sperdin, 2021; Sweeney & Swait, 2008). This definition applies primarily to commercial brands, but in the case of regional brands, we also deal with "returns" of tourists to the region,

the residents' attachment to the area and a sense of belonging, which includes the fact that entrepreneurs are customers of the region's brand (Bianchi & Pike, 2011). In the case of place brands, the local entrepreneurs manifest their loyalty by locating their units in the region, maintaining their businesses there and placing the region's logo on their goods.

Other assets referring to brand strength are all marks, logos, patents and utility models. However, for both commercial brands and place brands, they are brand specific and not always present.

The research conducted so far into place branding has mainly focused on cities' brands. The processes of shaping and communicating city brands are analyzed, and cities' brands are also compared with each other for various reasons (Braun, Kavaratis, & Zenker, 2010; Dinnie, 2011; Moilanen, 2015). Albeit studies on place brands include a few studies on region brands, which focus on theoretical considerations about differences between branding cities, regions and countries (Freire, 2004; Herstein, 2011), challenges were faced by region brands (Giovanardi, 2012) and the role of branding in economic development (Cleave, Arken, Sadler, & Gilliland, 2016).

The publications concerning region brands strictly are dominated by case studies of individual regions (Daszkiewicz & Wołosecka, 2019), which focus on qualitative and conceptual studies, primarily concentrated on the supply side, namely, regional authorities. Quantitative surveys among the primary recipients of place brands are mainly surveys among tourists and residents. In region branding, entrepreneurs are considered only in the context of economic attractiveness, attracting foreign capital or stimulating economic development.

The region brand, its management and the impact of the region brand on its recipients are rarely discussed in the literature, especially in the context of the opinions of local entrepreneurs, which forms a considerable gap in theory. As we mentioned, the region brand's associations can contribute to its perceived strength among local firms. Thus, this study aims at finding out the region brand's strength by measuring the awareness of its elements, brand associations and the perception of the region's promotional activity, on the example of Mazovia.

3. Review of Polish regions' image research

Polish regions have been involved in branding activities for two decades. Each Polish region created its logo and promotional slogan, undertaking certain promotional activities. Among them, Mazovia designed and promoted its brand and logo.

The review of publications to date has shown that even though each Polish province has its brand, not all monitor its impact on the environment. The possibility of assessing the impact of the brand and creating the image of the region's brand in the minds of recipients is provided only by conducting marketing research on selected groups of recipients. Among such studies giving knowledge about the region's brand is image research.

The Best Place Foundation – The European Place Marketing Institute conducted a research project in 2010 entitled "Promotion of local government units in the opinion of the heads of promotion," which sought to learn the opinions of respondents about the cities and regions that best perform promotional tasks. According to the study's authors, the Śląskie Voivodship has changed its face most since 2008, namely, from the moment the brand was created, receiving many awards and positive opinions, including during the Cities and regions Promotion Festival or the World Exhibition Expo 2010 in Shanghai.

The respondents identified several significant barriers that hinder the promotional activities of Polish cities and regions (according to the sum of the indications: rather agree, agree, agree entirely): insufficient cooperation with the private sector (82%); procurement procedures (82%); and region/city authorities' attitude (76%). Such high percentages of answers indicate an entrenched bureaucratic model that requires change.

That study also showed limited cooperation of local government units with local entrepreneurs, including companies from the tourism industry or merchants, citing the not-very-well-functioning law on public-private partnership as the main reason. This result shows how important it is to check local entrepreneurs' perception of regional promotion (Balkiewicz-Żerek, Leszczyńska, Orzechowska, & Sondej, 2018; Hanna & Rowley, 2019; Muñiz Martínez, 2016). What is essential, other Polish regions conducted similar surveys. The West Pomeranian region prepared an extensive study in 2014 on the recognition of its brand on the sample of 800 inhabitants of the voivodeship and 570 people from other areas, supplemented by a qualitative study of regional organizations and firms and 24 telephone interviews. This study showed that the level of recognition of the region's logo and promotional slogans was deficient (Bluehill Sp. z o. o. & Quality Watch Sp. z o. o., 2014).

The Podkarpackie region also decided to conduct image research in 2017 on 1063 Poles. The study showed that there are no clearly defined spontaneous associations with the region (70% of responses), and among assisting associations, only 17% associate the region with industrial specialization while the rest refers to tourism (69%) or organic farming (45%) (Raport z wizerunku Podkarpacia, [http](http://)).

The Małopolska region surveyed inhabitants ($n = 300$) and a sample of enterprises from the remaining 15 voivodeships ($n = 500$). This study provided local authorities with information that the Małopolska brand evokes positive associations on an emotional and functional level. Still, the brand image was not perceived independently but in the context of territorial sub-brands: Krakow and the Tatra Mountains (Balkiewicz-Żerek *et al.*, 2018).

The Mazovia region brand was created and launched in 2009 by the act passed by the Mazowieckie Voivodeship. The guidelines for using the Mazovia region brand are included in the *Book of Visual Identification of the Mazovia Brand*, which regulates the principles of using individual brand elements. In its symbolism and colors, Mazovia refers to its historical symbols and colors: white and red. The Strategy for the Promotion of the Mazowieckie Voivodeship, established in 2007, lost its mission in 2020, which ended this strategic document's validity which was of key importance for the region brand. In January 2021, the Mazowieckie Voivodeship adopted the Executive Plan for the Promotion Strategy of the Mazowieckie Voivodeship for 2021, considering the pandemic situation and focusing on a promotional campaign encouraging holiday and weekend visits to Mazovia, along with a series of regional education activities, including the promotion of Mazovia's identity among its inhabitants.

So far, no campaign has been specifically tailored to entrepreneurs and investors, and the region does not have an economic promotion slogan. So after more than a decade, we should check whether brand awareness among a critical group of stakeholders – small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) from Mazovia – is at a significant level, and what associations shape the image of this brand. Moreover, we should check whether the Mazovia region's brand awareness correlates with the region's promotional activities and whether local companies notice any related benefits, despite no systematic promotional campaign aimed at entrepreneurs.

In this context, this study will scrutinize the Mazovia region's brand strength. In particular, we would like to find answers to the following research questions:

- RQ1. Is there a *significant* level of the region *brand awareness* among the local entrepreneurs?
- RQ2. What *associations with the region brand* are formed in this group?
- RQ3. Do local entrepreneurs perceive the region's *promotion as beneficial*? How are the potential benefits of regional branding perceived by this group?

The Mazovia region is the largest in Poland and one of the largest in *Central Europe*. Moreover, it hosts many entrepreneurs and provides an attractive economic environment for them (www.mazovia.pl). This region also has over a decade of experience with branding, and therefore, it is a good research subject.

4. Methods

Computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) was employed in December 2020, by an independent research agency on a sample of 151 SMEs registered in the Mazowieckie Voivodeship (Mazovia region). The results analyzed here were part of a broader research project on local entrepreneurs' perception of the Mazovia region brand. The sample was selected purposefully by the market research agency from a panel of entrepreneurs from the Mazovia region. The selection criteria were: industry section, company size (micro/small/medium) and company headquarters. The study analyzed SMEs because reaching their owners and managers as respondents allowed us to fulfill the study's goal, in contrast to large firms from which it is difficult to receive a uniform opinion from managers about regional branding efforts. Moreover, the micro, small and medium-sized enterprises constitute an overwhelming majority of enterprises in Poland (99.8%; *Raport o stanie sektora małych i średnich przedsiębiorstw w Polsce*). So it is an essential group of entities in the Polish economy. The study examined entities from two different sections of the Polish Classification of Activity: 76 companies from the furniture production industry (Section C: industrial processing; division 31: furniture production) and 75 companies from the food and beverage production industry (Section C: industrial processing; division 10: food production; and division 1: beverage production). This choice stemmed from a large number of entrepreneurs from these industries present in the Mazowieckie Voivodeship and the desire to juxtapose two different sectors. The selected respondents were managers, company owners and specialists with sufficient knowledge to answer questions about the Mazovia region brand. In total, 50 micro-sized, 58 small and 43 medium-sized companies partook in the survey. Such proportions of respondents in the sample allowed for a proportional share of responses from all three types of companies. Of them, 130 companies were registered in cities, including 88 in large cities, and 21 were registered in villages. The characteristics of the sample are presented in [Table 1](#).

The study was conducted using a questionnaire created by us based on the literature. The survey included open- and closed-ended questions about the Mazovia region brand. Most of

Company size	Amount	Place of registration	Amount	PKD section	Amount	Gender	Amount	Position in the company	Amount
Micro	50	village	21	subsection 10 – grocery	69	female	82	Specialist	84
Small	58	city to 10,000 inhabitants	16	subsection 11 – drinks	6	male	69	Junior Manager	40
Medium	43	city from 10,001 to 50,000 inhabitants	17	subsection 31 – furniture	76			Senior Manager	27
		city from 50,001 to 100,000 inhabitants	9						
		city from 100,001 inhabitants	88						
Total					151				

Source(s): Own elaboration

Table 1. Characteristics of the studied sample

the latter (25) included seven-point Likert scales permitted by their topics, while others (seven questions) used shorter scales (nominal or five-point scales).

Statistical data analysis was performed using the IBM SPSS software version 26. The main statistical tools used to analyze the relationships were the Pearson correlation coefficient, Spearman's rank correlation coefficient and the chi-square test with significance tests.

5. Results

The initial aim of the analyses was to assess the brand awareness of Mazovia among the local firms. Two dimensions of brand awareness were tested: top-of-mind and assisted brand awareness.

Brand awareness is the awareness of its elements. Therefore, the respondents were asked: "Do you know the logo of Mazovia?" and "What does it show?" Most of the respondents did not know the logo of Mazovia; as many as 59% (89/151) replied: "I don't know it" (Table 2).

Summarizing Table 2, it is clear that, in total, 31% of respondents correctly associated the logotype of the region "with the red word Mazowsze on a white background" (15%), with "heart" (6%), "with the red inscription" (10%). Unfortunately, other respondents did not know the logo.

The next question concerned another brand element: the promotional slogan. The question was "Do you know the promotional slogan of the Mazovia region? If so, please provide approximate content." The awareness of the Mazovia region's promotional slogan was low ($n = 21$). The relationship between these two variables was investigated next. Because these variables were normally distributed and we were interested in discovering any monotonic dependence between the variables, we used Spearman's coefficient. The statistics reached a relatively high value of 0.447, which proves that the knowledge of the logo and slogan was correlated to a moderate degree.

Next, the top-of-mind awareness was examined with the question: "What do you associate with the Mazovia region?" The dominant association among the respondents was Warsaw, understood as a city, but also as the capital of Poland (Figure 1).

The second significant association among entrepreneurs was "monuments." Some of them indicated "Royal Castle" and "mermaid." Notably, some entrepreneurs associated the Mazovia region with the center of Poland, numerous enterprises and inhabitants. For further analysis, all the spontaneous associations of SMEs with the Mazovia region were grouped into five main content categories.

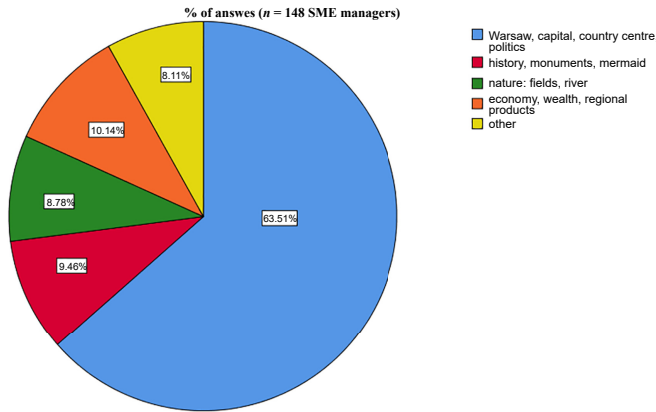
Due to the relatively high answers homogeneity, we decided to apply the chi-square test of independence. The chi-square likelihood ratio and linear relationship tests of variables were related to the logo associations, promotional slogan associations and associations with the region. The tests were conducted to check whether there are any relationships/dependencies between these variables. We could have used the tests because the dependent variable (types of associations with the region) was a nominal variable. The test statistics showed that the knowledge of the region's logo and promotional slogan was not related to associations with the region (Table 3).

Furthermore, the analysis showed that belonging to the industry did not affect the associations with the region (Table 4).

Association	No. of answers	Percent of total sample
The inscription Mazovia on a white background	23	15%
The heart	9	6%
The red inscription	15	10%
Other	3	2%

Table 2.
The top-of-mind associations of the respondents with the logo of Mazovia

Source(s): Own elaboration based on an analysis with IBM SPSS



Source(s): Own elaboration based on IBM SPSS, n = 151

Figure 1. Associations with the Mazovia region

Test	Value	df	Two-tailed significance
Chi-squared	0.466	4	0.977
Likelihood ratio	0.472	4	0.976
Linear relationship	0.119	1	0.730
significant observations	148		

Source(s): Own elaboration in SPSS IBM

Table 3. The relationship between the knowledge of the logo and types of associations with the region

Test	Value	df	Two-tailed significance
Chi-squared	8.382*	4	0.079
Likelihood ratio	8.608	4	0.072
Linear relationship	7.422	1	0.006
Significant observations	148		

Note(s): *a. 0.0% of cells (0) had the expected number lower than 5. The minimum expected number was 5.92
 Source(s): Own elaboration based on IBM SPSS

Table 4. The relationship between the represented industry and associations with the region

The top-of-mind brand awareness should also result from the activities of the region's authorities to promote the region brand. Therefore, we asked the respondents: "Have you come across the promotional and information activities of the region's authorities regarding the Voivodeship and its values? (tourist, cultural, economic)." As many as 88% of the respondents encountered no promotional activities of the region, while only 11% met some form of promotion. The latter group was asked: "What were these activities?" The answers were very diverse, and the most frequently mentioned ones were "promoting tourist attractions" and "promoting Warsaw or promoting cultural activities."

Next, we decided to check whether the region's slogan and logo knowledge were related to the respondents' belief about the impact of promotional activities on their company. They were asked: "How have the region's promotional activities influenced your company?"

This question was asked on a seven-point Likert scale, in which 1 meant “I completely disagree” and 7 “I fully agree.”

Cross-tabulation and Spearman’s coefficient were used to check the correlations. We showed that the region’s perceived influence of promotional efforts and awareness of the logo are correlated with each other (Table 5).

Furthermore, we asked the respondents whether, in their opinion, “The Voivodeship specializes in any economic sector of activity.” As many as 33% of respondents believed that the Mazovia region does not specialize in any specific industry, 41% had no opinion and only 25% believed that such a specialization exists. Those who indicated the specialization of the Voivodeship were asked to clarify what industry/field they had in mind. The respondents indicated IT (7 responses), agriculture and food industry (6), general manufacturing (5), automotive industry (5), modern technologies (5), fuel production (5), general industrial production (3) and furniture production (2).

We also decided to check if the perceived benefits of Mazovia’s promotional activities were accompanied by the willingness to mark the respondent’s services/goods with the region’s brand, which was declared by 32 firms (21%).

We clearly noticed a weak correlation between the willingness to use the Mazovia region logo on the entrepreneurs’ products/services and the perceived increase in the scope of activity in the form of new markets/new customers (Table 6).

Table 5.
The relationship between the awareness of Mazovia logo and slogan and the impact of promotional activities on the surveyed companies

How did the promotional activities of the region influence your company?			Awareness of the promotional slogan	Awareness of the logo
Spearman’s Rho	They increased the recognition of my company in the country	Correlation coefficient	0.233**	0.266**
	They increased the trust of existing clients/business partners in my company	Correlation coefficient	0.226**	0.280**
	They increased the interest in my company’s offer among customers	Correlation coefficient	0.220**	0.275**
	They increased the range of my company’s activity	Correlation coefficient	0.246**	0.289**

Note(s): **Correlation is significant at the level of 0.01 (two-tailed)
Source(s): Own elaboration based on IBM SPSS

Table 6.
The relationship between willingness to use Mazovia region logo and the perceived brand’s benefits

			How did the Mazovia’s promotional activities influence the company? They increased the range of my company’s activity
Would you like to be able to label your products or services with the Mazovia brand?	Pearson’s correlation coefficient		0.191*
	Spearman’s correlation coefficient		0.176*
	N		151

Note(s): *Correlation significant at the level of 0.05 (two-tailed)
Source(s): Own elaboration based on IBM SPSS

6. Discussion and conclusions

Our study concentrated on the Mazovia region, seeking to assess the region brand's strength by measuring the awareness of the regional brand elements, associations and the perception of the region's promotional activity within the corporate customers' group. Therefore, the study broadened the knowledge on the marketing of regions and branding in the rarely studied group of local government customers: the local SMEs. Thus, the study contributed to the broader field of territorial marketing by showing how awareness, associations and perceived promotion benefits may contribute to the region brand's value. Moreover, the study revealed how the authorities may build a strong regional brand.

As it is one of the first studies in Poland focused on regional branding among entrepreneurs with the use of a quantitative method, the study's character was exploratory, which allows us to draw initial conclusions and suggest further research areas.

The first step of the presented analysis was conducted to learn about the Mazovia region brand's awareness among local entrepreneurs, which showed a low level of top-of-mind brand awareness. The reason can be the lack of the region's promotional activities or their inadequate reach. The purposive selection of the sample enabled us to reach the respondents aware of the authorities' branding activities and able to respond to the questions regarding the regional brand, which allows us to conclude that the logo of the Mazovia region and its image requires reinforcement among the entrepreneurs. Nevertheless, the awareness of the logo and the perceived influence of regional promotional efforts on the companies are significantly correlated. Assuming the logo provides such functions as identification, information and communication – identification enables quick and unambiguous recognition of the brand, information points to functional features, while communication provides a story about products in promotional activities (Altkorn, 1999) – the study results in evidence that the logo of the Mazovia region fulfills mainly the identification and communication function. To satisfy the information function, the logo should also lead to more specialist associations, which were not noted in this study.

Analogous results were obtained in the studies of other Polish regions, like the West-Pomeranian region, where a fairly extensive survey was conducted in 2014 regarding its recognition (Badania wizerunku województwa zachodniopomorskiego, [http](http://www.wzr.wz.pom.pl/)). As far as the region's promotional signs are concerned, the degree of recognition of its logotype and promotional slogans is shallow. At the same time, the respondents who know them mostly hold positive opinions about the logo or the wording of the slogans. On the other hand, representatives of West Pomeranian institutions and enterprises are critical of the Voivodeship's visual symbols: they indicated that these elements are too general. They recommend seeking such features that would distinguish the West Pomeranian Voivodeship from other regions of Poland, including golf, sails, the Slavs and Vikings' festival. Despite the low level of recognition of brand elements among those who know the brand, when comparing it with the results from Mazovia, the West Pomeranian Voivodeship brand perception still appears as the more developed one.

Another important conclusion of our study is that the respondents clearly associate the Mazovia region with Warsaw. Moreover, popular associations focus on the region's history and heritage, and the central role it plays in the country. Notably, Warsaw is a separate brand prepared by the city authorities. Thus, the correspondence of the Mazovia region brand with Warsaw is correct; albeit the associations should not be limited to one urban center and its monuments; they should be more diverse. To increase the strength of the region brand, the associations should focus on specific industries and product categories or the particular functional benefits of conducting business in the area (Bose *et al.*, 2018; Hankinson, 2010). Similar results were obtained for the Małopolskie region brand (Raport marki Małopolska, www.obserwatorium.malopolska.pl). The survey in the Małopolska region revealed that, just like in Mazovia, entrepreneurs from Małopolska perceived a low level of promotional activity, but this did not affect recommendations for and loyalty to the region.

A survey was also conducted in the Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship, where 40% of respondents were uncertain about the effectiveness of the region's promotion (Lemanowicz, 2017, pp. 95–96). This one and the other results above could suggest that the regional government's promotional activities are generally little known or perceived as ineffective by large parts of the target groups in Poland.

The lack of a diversified regional image of Mazovia and a concentration on the region's capital, Warsaw, might also be due to the city's long-term promotional efforts. These have been happening for at least a decade, and they are based on detailed promotional planning (Urząd m.st. Warszawa, 2022). Thus, the Voivodeship authorities should develop a new region brand by choosing a set of attributes distinctive from Warsaw's positioning, which would strengthen the Mazovia brand's position among its recipients. A strong place brand can create a shared vision for the future of the community and its potential, provide a consistent representation of the place, enhance its regional and global awareness and position, shed unfavorable stereotypes associated with the location and raise its appeal (Sameh, Abd El-Aziz, & Hefnawy, 2018, p. 1061).

The lack of relationship between the awareness of the slogan and the types of associations with the region may also mean that the slogan's content does not simply change the existing stereotypes about the region among entrepreneurs.

The lack of relationships between the associations with the region's brand and other variables tested in our study means that the collocation of the Mazovia region brand attributes is poorly established and knowing one of them does not entail knowing the other one. It also indicates a low brand equity level. Such results lead to the implication that to strengthen the brand of Mazovia, the regional authorities should invest more in the frequency of promoting the region among certain strongly engaged user groups to increase their brand awareness level. This could serve as an educational campaign among "region ambassadors" who would later pass their opinions to other potential customers (Taecharungroj, 2016). On the other hand, the current communication content should be diversified more to evoke certain associations with the region in specific customer groups. For example, respondents already recognized IT and food industries as the leading specializations of the region. Thus, communication efforts would increase the perceived brand utility among these customers and draw the attention of new ones (Kavaratis & Ashworth, 2005, p. 184).

The awareness of the region's logo among SMEs shows the strongest correlation with the belief that promotional activities increased the scope of company operations, suggesting the logo's appreciation by the SMEs who already know it. Moreover, this evidences the perceived utility of the brand among those customers. Perhaps developing sub-brands using the logo as an umbrella brand and focusing on various industry branches located in Mazovia could produce even better results. The literature shows that co-branding and alliances of product and place brands have the same goals: to achieve a synergistic effect of joint promotion of products and services, which is created by minimizing marketing-related expenses (Vlasova & Kulikova, 2017). There is already a small group of B2B customers who could engage in such a cooperation.

The research conclusions regarding the perceived benefits of the brand in the form of new customers with the willingness to use the Mazovia logo agree with the theory of the region umbrella brands. The observed growing range of activities in the form of new markets/customers is consistent with the literature. Categorical expansion in the form of an umbrella brand allows for acquiring new market segments and consumer groups (Aarshod, Ness, & Haugkand, 2020; Alexander, Teller, & Wood, 2020). Thus, this study's practical implications suggest that regional authorities should try establishing such an umbrella brand that would cover several sub-brands promoting separate industries in the region's specializations.

Moreover, the relationship between entrepreneurs' willingness to use the Mazovia region brand and their range of operations may indicate that – thanks to the use of the brand – some

enterprises already became more recognizable on the market or enjoy greater trust, which increases their loyalty toward the region. This conclusion needs confirmation in future studies among representatives of other industries. However, this initial finding is similar to other studies that show positive results of regional promotion on SME activity (Cleave *et al.*, 2016; Ruchkina, Melnichuk, Frumina, & Mentel, 2017).

Furthermore, the region of Mazovia can aim at providing other, more complex benefits perceived by SMEs. For example, the region's positioning as a high-tech industry location and emphasis on the high-quality specialized food and packaging cluster in Mazovia can bring more specialized associations of the regional image with companies' positioning, like in the case of regions positioned thanks to specialized fairs and exhibitions (Ferreira Custódio & Gouveia, 2007; Lampel & Meyer, 2008).

To summarize, high brand awareness, positive image and high perceived brand quality generate buyers' loyalty toward a brand, thus increasing brand strength (Witek-Hajduk, 2011). The positive, homogeneous associations with the region brand may cause strong positive associations with the products manufactured there, thus forming the country/region of origin effect (Laroche, Papadopoulos, Heslop, & Mourali, 2005, p. 100) and the feeling of greater loyalty among local entrepreneurs, who might decide to engage in co-branding, by placing the region's logo on their products. Referring to the presented results to the attributes of a strong brand, we should emphasize that the Mazovia region brand's image is relatively positive and is associated mainly with the region's central role in Poland, economic development and cultural heritage. However, the brand awareness level among entrepreneurs is unsatisfactory. Many respondents confuse the region brand with the brand of Warsaw. Thus, the authorities can build a clear industrial brand of the Mazovia region based on the conscious recipients of the brand. It could further lead to benefits from the more precise positioning of Mazovia in selected industries. Effective promotional activities could increase the Mazovia region brand's synergy with the brands of flagship producers.

These practical implications can be used by the Mazovia region authorities to reinforce their brand awareness among target enterprise groups. They should position the Mazovia brand more clearly, as it has more to offer in terms of brand utility than only the capital region. For this purpose, future studies should identify the associations with the region in different target groups and use them purposefully to develop a stronger brand. Future research could also examine in more detail whether entrepreneurs wish to participate more in co-branding with the region to benefit from the recent local government promotional activities.

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awareness

Corresponding author

Katarzyna Młotkowska can be contacted at: blanka.janiszevska@gmail.com

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