

ALPHA WOLVES. ARE LOCAL BUSINESS LEADERS IMPORTANT FOR THE REGION BRAND? CASE STUDY OF WROCLAW AGGLOMERATION

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Purpose: The main objective of this study is to investigate and clarify the role of local business leaders in creating region brand.

Design/methodology/approach: The article uses the qualitative case study method to describe the role of local business leaders in shaping region brand. The analysis is conducted using Wroclaw Agglomeration as a subject.

Findings: The research conducted enabled to initially investigate and clarify some aspects of creating a place brand image using stakeholders engagement.

Research limitations: The research presented in the article is qualitative, making it impossible to infer the entire region's population.

Practical implications: The article includes essential conclusions valid for regions' authorities, mainly in the area of creating a positive brand image in the economic context and the importance of engaging stakeholders in this process.

Originality/value: The paper supplements the management sciences literature with knowledge about the local business leaders' role in creating a region brand.

Keywords: business leader, region, region brand, personal brand, brand image.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

Among many marketing concepts, the brand concept seems to be the most complex one. Numerous dimensions and factors refer to various types of brands, but especially to the concept of a place brand. Place (region, city, country etc.) is a specific, complicated and multidimensional construct with various stakeholders groups, making its branding a difficult and long-term task. However current scientific literature provides a significant number of conceptual models, methods and techniques that, used in practice, enable the city to distinguish and position on the national, continent or world scale (Kavaratzis, 2005), it is still discussed what particular activities are able to make place branding more effective.

In the following paper, the authoress initially analyses the role of local business leaders in creating region brand. Both their active and passive participation in this process is discussed, which means that not only their personal effort is considered, but also including them, as personas, and their stories, in region brand narration. The starting point for this consideration is – on the one hand - repeatedly confirmed fact that community stakeholders engagement is an essential asset of place branding (Berrada, 2018) and, on the second hand - the visible tendency of entrepreneurs to build strong and consistent personal brands, which, in turn, encourage them to be actively present in the regional business context.

The paper has been divided into four parts. In the first part, a brief overview of the previous research on leaders and leadership in the context of region branding is presented. The second part concerns the methodology, research questions, and sample selection method. The third section presents the main findings of the research. Finally, the fourth part gives the conclusion, summary and critique of the findings.

2. Literature review

Various models of place branding, which can be found in the previous research in the area of management (Anholt, 2007; Ashworth, 2009; Balakrishnan, Kerr, 2013; Berrada, 2018; Hanna, Rowley, 2011; Kavaratzis, 2004, 2005) confirm that one of the most crucial aspects of creating region brand is community stakeholders engagement, which is understood as engagement of "residents of a place who may be involved and mobilized to support the development and improvement of the brand identity and the brand delivery" (Berrada, 2018, p. 228). Moreover, according to Acharya and Rahman (2016), stakeholders participation is one of the three fundamental concepts in the nomological network of constructs related to the place brand concept (Figure 1).

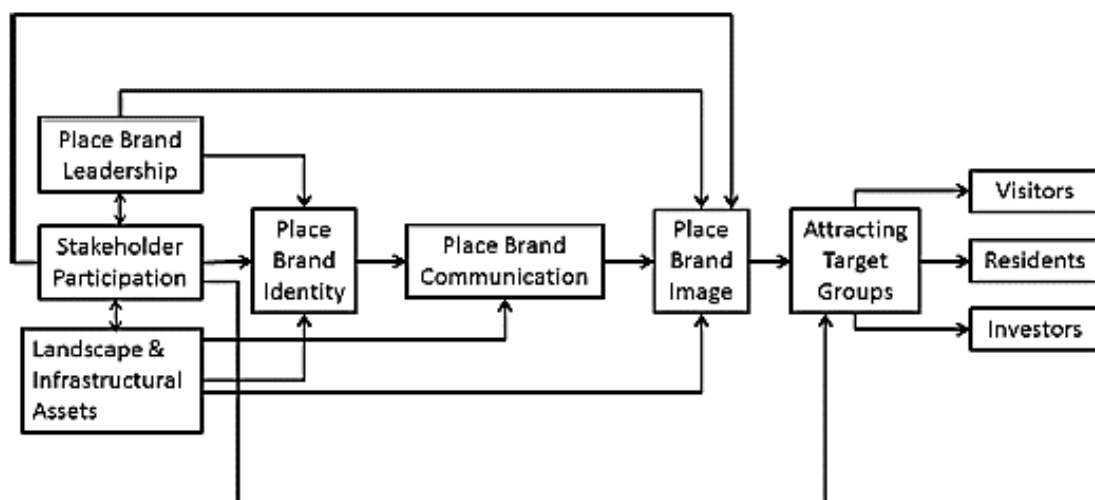


Figure 1. Nomological network of constructs related to the place brand concept.

Source: Acharya, Rahman, 2016.

Additionally, some scientists identify different roles the residents play in place branding. They can be either integral part of the place brand through their characteristics and behaviour or ambassadors for their place brand who grant credibility to any communicated message (Braun et al., 2013; Hatch, Schultz, 2010). In terms of creating a favourable economic image of the region, local business leaders, whose success stories may reinforce interest in investing and starting a new venture there, should be considered in both roles.

The extensive leadership literature with almost 70 existing leadership theories (Mango, 2018) usually understands a leader as “one or more people who select, equips, trains, and influences one or more follower(s) who have diverse gifts, abilities, and skills and focuses the follower(s) to the organization's mission and objectives causing the follower(s) to willingly and enthusiastically expend spiritual, emotional, and physical energy in a concerted, coordinated effort to achieve the organizational mission and objectives” (Winston, Patterson, 2006) and emphasize leader's role in shaping the local business environment.

What is more, currently, business leaders are more and more interested in creating their personal brands. In the modern economy, personal branding skills are considered to be a "leadership imperative" (Loppis, 2013; Perkins, 2015). Personal branding of the business leaders is mainly discussed in an organizational context and the reputation of an organization (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Khedher, 2014; Ranft et al., 2006; Saad, Yaacob, 2021; Zarkada, 2012), as it was proven, that personal brand of CEO is more effective in generating goodwill and brand equity than a business brand because society trusts people more than businesses (Montoya, 2002) and can create significant value for organizations (Bendisch et al., 2013).

However, it is clearly visible that leaders tend to be recognized brands not only inside the company they lead but also in the local business environment, understood mainly as a local business network and building consistent, mutually beneficial relationships with the local business ecosystem. This tendency is one of the so-called industry-related drivers to build the personal brand (Gorbatov et al., 2018, p. 12), which are claimed to be particularly important in shaping leaders' positive attitude towards personal branding and – broader – towards being actively present in the local business community. Various research stated that significant involvement can create a successful personal brand (Lo, Peng, 2022).

In turn, from the region's perspective, public engagement of business leaders in emphasizing a positive economic climate may be an important aspect of its brand narration. So-called "entrepreneurial personality" of local business leaders (Baluku et al., 2016; Boyatzis, 2006; Chatterjee, Das, 2015; Gibb, Ritchie, 1982; Korunka et al., 2010; Zaech, Baldegger, 2017) together with the whole regional background, can be additionally a part of region brand biography (Avery et al., 2010), underlining its support for entrepreneurs, whose stories can be viewed as assets for place branding.

3. Methods

In order to investigate and clarify the role of local business leaders in creating region brand, the authoress uses qualitative, descriptive case study methodology. It is a research approach that facilitates the exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources. It is mainly applied when the focus of the study is to answer “how” and “why” questions (Baxter, Jack, 2008). As the subject (unit) of the analysis, the authoress has chosen The Wroclaw metropolitan area and additionally bind the time being analyzed to years 2021-2022 (Creswell, 1998). To perform analysis, various data sources were included: mainly websites and social media, reports, individual in-depth interviews (with city representatives and entrepreneurs) and participant observation.

To complete the conclusions, additionally, the qualitative content analysis method was used, which is *a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication* (Berelson, 1952, p. 18). It was included to identify patterns and make some conclusions about the communicator (both agglomeration authorities and entrepreneurs), message and its effects or the situation and sociocultural background (White, Marsh, 2006, pp. 27, 34). In the course of content analysis, official websites and social media of both local authorities and entrepreneurs and additionally leading free access media from the beginning of 2022 were analyzed, creating a sample of nearly 200 units of analysis (social media posts, articles, news, video etc.). Following the procedure of this type of research, some content categories were defined and interpreted (McMillan, 2000; Riffe et al., 2005).

3.1. Research questions

Considering the above assumptions and the research problem identified in the introduction to this article, it was decided to formulate the following research questions:

RQ1: How can regions use local business leaders and their stories to create a positive brand image?

RQ2: What role can local business leaders play in shaping region brand?

RQ3: Do local business leaders engage themselves in creating positive region brand, and how?

3.2. Choice of the region analyzed

The Wroclaw metropolitan area has been chosen as the unit of analysis. Below, the authoress briefly presents the motivation for this choice.

Wroclaw metropolitan area is a monocentric agglomeration located in the southwestern part of Poland, in the Lower Silesian Voivodship. It consists of the city of Wroclaw and its satellite towns. The population living in the agglomeration was about 1,25 million people in 2021, but it has risen rapidly in 2022 due to the intensive influx of immigrants from Ukraine (Union of Polish Metropolises, 2022).

However, the area is not strongly urbanized, it states a well-developed network of cities, which are economically and geographically linked to Wrocław, being currently one of the leading Polish R&D and IT centres. Various activities, but also reports and statistics confirm, that the city authorities are focused on building a robust, effective and cooperative business ecosystem (ARAW, 2022), which is a friendly place, especially for start-ups. According to the latest report of the Startup Poland Foundation, the Lower Silesia region with Wrocław took second place in terms of the number of registered start-ups (Startup Poland Foundation, 2021) and is a national leader in attracting foreign direct investment.

Among 2,987 Polish start-ups, on average, every tenth starts its operation in Wrocław (Polish Development Fund, 2022), which makes it the city with the highest start-up concentration in Poland (Wrocław Agglomeration Development Agency, 2021). The reasons for such interest of start-up founders in operating in this area of Poland are various. Except for a favourable geographic location, Wrocław is not only the most significant labour market in South-Western Poland but also one of the most important academic centres in the country, with thriving business incubators. Moreover, the city and its suburbs run Special Economic Zones, thanks to which investors can conduct business on preferential terms.

An essential advantage of the region is also significant organizational support for entrepreneurs. In the city operates Wrocław Technology Park (Wrocław Technology Park, 2022), which role is to support companies from the high-tech sector and Wrocław Research Centre EIT+ (EIT+, 2022), which possesses a comprehensive research infrastructure in order to support innovation, new technologies and research needs of the industry (Książek, Suszczewicz, 2017).

Another important organization is The Wrocław Agglomeration Development Agency (ARAW), a company established in 2005, owned by the Wrocław Commune and 32 local governments from the agglomeration. One of its brand is Startup Wrocław, which mission is to "bring together all local ecosystem players to promote and support the growth of innovation, entrepreneurship and cooperation" (Startup Wrocław, 2022). Among numerous tasks connected with organizing and supporting the local business ecosystem, according to the website, its role is to work on the city's economic promotion and attract foreign investors and promote Wrocław start-ups success stories (Startup Wrocław, 2022).

Such intensive development in terms of economy and business goes hand in hand with the general strategic goals of Wrocław, which are emphasized in the city's Strategy 2030, like reliance on social capital, innovation and entrepreneurship (City of Wrocław, 2017). Additional supplement to the strategy called "Enterprising Wrocław 2030" set "promoting" entrepreneurship and entrepreneurs as one of the city's strategic goals (City of Wrocław, 2019). In the document, it was rightly noticed that entrepreneurs could reinforce the region brand's positive image among various stakeholders, like other young entrepreneurs, students, investors and business tourists. In the following part of the article, the authoress presents the main findings of the analysis conducted in the course of case study research and formulates managerial implications for regional authorities in this regard.

4. Findings

Findings obtained in the course of case study research refer to both active and passive participation of business leaders in creating region brand image and are considered both from the region and business perspective.

According to the representative of ARAW, “Local leaders act as the city's ambassadors. They spread information about the region among other countries (to mother/sister companies, international advisory boards etc.) They also participate in local initiatives inviting other companies to join and initiate joint projects to create favourable conditions for the business's existence. Also, many business leaders engage in mentoring programs sharing their knowledge, experience and company culture with younger generations, thus helping to shape future business leaders.”

Some local business leaders are highly interested in participating in actions which role is to create a positive economic image of the region. According to the individual in-depth interviews conducted ($n = 3$), their primary motivations are rarely altruistic and related to the desire to promote their business and themselves - they perceive a growing need to be recognizable on a local scale. Among the most important activities of region branding that actively engage local business leaders are various business and business-related events. In the Wroclaw Agglomeration, we can observe a growing number of business events, e.g. "Made in Wroclaw", which gather local entrepreneurs, enabling them to network and share their success stories. The last edition of this meeting, entitled "Future mindset", was summarized by local media mainly as the gathering of "valued businessmen, innovators and scientists" (Wroclaw TV, 2022), which confirms basing narration on the strong personalities. Together with its program, full of speeches, it shows the will to underline the role and position of local business leaders. The city also hosts important international business events, like Wolves Summit in 2022, which is an event that brings together “alpha wolves” - entrepreneurs, investors, representatives of corporations, and recruiters looking for young, ambitious, and talented people ready to start a career in the world of technology and innovation (Wolves Summit, 2022).

Another essential tool for creating the positive business identity of the Wroclaw Agglomeration brand are various reports, rankings and awards, which rules and results are widely spread using official and private social media accounts. Also, local media are willing to share the effects of national and international successes of the region itself and local entrepreneurs -it is regarded as a reason to be proud for all citizens. An example of this kind of award is the "Lower Silesian Griffin Award", which is awarded yearly in various categories, including innovative business ideas, achievements in promoting development in Lower Silesia, commitment to CSR and cooperation with science.

Other significant findings were obtained in the course of qualitative content analysis. The authoress analyzed the official websites and social media of local authorities and entrepreneurs and, additionally, the leading media from the beginning of 2022. Some illustrative examples of the content analyzed are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.
Results of content analysis – selected examples

	About region	About business leaders
Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Wroclaw wants to be the Polish Silicon Valley". • "On the list of top 10 Polish bio and nanotechnology start-ups - half of them are companies from Wroclaw". • "Nearly every fifth Polish start-up operating in the field of artificial intelligence (AI) comes from Wroclaw". • "Wroclaw stands out from other cities in Poland and is one of the most important centres of the gamedev industry". 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "(...) A Polish woman, more specifically a resident of Olesnica, is one of the most inspiring women in the world". • "companies (...) that are the engine of economic life in the region"
Region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "goal is to provide real, professional support to Lower Silesian entrepreneurs". • "Wroclaw always tries to think about the future in order to be at least one step ahead of others. This is not a competition. This is embedded in the DNA of Wroclaw's people, business and academic community and local communities". • "(they) praise Wroclaw primarily for its relatively good access to skilled workers. They also appreciate the culture of networking, mutual assistance and exchange of experience". • "The city is known for its business-friendly approach: many renowned Polish companies were founded here, and foreign investors regarded Wroclaw as one of the best locations in Europe". 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "it is entrepreneurs who create not only our beautiful city but also our region, and thus its success and future". • "Microentrepreneurs? Innovators? Students? Social activists? Who and how makes Wroclaw develop so dynamically?"

Source: own elaboration based on results of content analysis of social media websites and web pages of regional authorities, entrepreneurs and media. Authoress's translation.

The content analysis enabled to identify some repeatable narration patterns about local business leaders. However, the analysis was qualitative, it could be observed that both media and region willingly share news about the successes of local business leaders, focusing on their regional roots or region as a place of activity. However, this news rarely takes the form in which the individual achievements of the businessman are presented and happens most often in the case of either spectacular achievements on a global scale or in the case of a young entrepreneur's age. The stories of women who have been successful in business are also presented more often. Both in the media and official channels of the city authorities, the narrative concerning the position of Wroclaw on the business map of the country and Europe prevails. Also, it is important to note that only seldom authors of a message decide to use evaluative terms in relation to entrepreneurs (e.g. "inspiring", "skilled", "successful") but also – relatively rarely – present the whole story of a business leader, a venture or an innovation.

Conclusions

The objective of this paper was to explore whether and to what extent business leaders are essential for creating region brand. The image power of this group of stakeholders is significant and finds a visible reflection in media and social media coverage. Both media representatives and social media users are interested and impressed by the success stories of entrepreneurs – founders and managers of local ventures. This is why news including this type of content is willingly published and shared. The ongoing participation of local business leaders can be demonstrated in various ways, both online and offline, and seems to be crucial for the vitality of the place brand. It is also mutually beneficial – both for the region and for the business stakeholders, as the vast majority of business leaders is increasingly eager to make their work visible through story-driven content, enabling them to build their own personal brands.

The findings presented above confirm that business leaders' engagement can be an important asset in creating a region brand and has a huge image potential. However, the analyzed case of Wrocław shows that the full potential of business representatives in these terms is not used, and, despite declarations in official documents, their possible engagement is not managed strategically.

According to previous research (Sandbach, 2022), stakeholders participation does not have to be concentrated in the development phase of brand creation but is an ongoing process that needs to be facilitated by the brand manager. What is more, a place brand becomes more authentic when local stakeholders are involved in the process of creating it. Unfortunately, the observation held in the course of case study research clearly shows that this kind of facilitation does not exist. Various attempts to create a region brand do not involve strategic stakeholders engagement, and different opportunities for business leaders to active participation are not fully used. For example, events are not treated as a chance to locally produce videos, photographs, feature articles and interviews explicitly made with the intention of emphasizing the business aspects of the region's brand.

To conclude - it is vital for city authorities to understand that, however, sustaining stakeholders participation can be challenging, such co-branding is one of the most effective methods used in the development and promotion of territorial brands, and the brand content co-created by internal actors shapes region brand authenticity, but it needs strategic facilitation.

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