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Is the grass elsewhere really greener? A study on the place marketing activity of Polish self-governments

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Abstract. The role of place marketing and branding as a modus for enhancing public sector efficiency is growing, especially in territorial self-government units (TSGUs). A growing proportion maintains the relevant responsible agencies. We compared the place marketing activities of Polish TSGUs, focusing on their maturity in this matter. We associate maturity with the awareness that one should not be ashamed of territorial uniqueness but, on the contrary, highlight it as a source of merit. We based our study on self-evaluation carried out by marketing practitioners operating in Polish TSGUs. The results reveal that most of them do not yet fully exploit state-of-the-art place marketing to strengthen development policies. However, they vary significantly by disclosing many interesting local specificities.

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1. Introduction

Place marketing and branding can positively affect a place's identity/image and socio-political and economic spheres (Lucarelli, 2012). The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted one more critical role of place marketing. Marketing may increase the credibility and communication efficiency of public institutions. Similarly, place marketing may enhance citizens' trust in institutions and trust among citizens. During the pandemic, remote communication (work, services, entertainment) gained particular importance. At that time, the role of public institutions also turned out to be the most important, and the efficiency of public institutions depends strongly on the degree of development of marketing functions. Thus, we emphasise, among other things, the role of symbolism recognition, communication efficiency, easy access to the necessary data, and the trustworthiness and reliability of public communications as an essential element of the changing landscape of local government institutions at present (Zavattaro, Marland & Eshuis, 2021). Our study reveals that territorial self-government units (TSGUs) that use available marketing tools more efficiently cope better with adapting to new conditions. In other words, they are more resilient (Berkes & Ross, 2013; Chandler, 2014).

Marketing practices, however, continually evolve due to processes that occur in territorial units and their surroundings. Today, besides communication activities, it is developing into a more comprehensive and systemic approach. It includes a multi-stakeholder approach (Boisen et al., 2018; Lee and Kotler, 2020) and is transforming into a more participative practices (Ginesta & de San Eugenio, 2020: 646). Thus, we have experienced a widespread worldwide "maturation" of place branding, from simple techniques to a comprehensive, collaborative and citizen-based approach. Also, while previously universal methods and approaches were used in place branding, today, attempts are being made to adapt marketing activities to territorial uniqueness. It is not true that the grass is greener elsewhere, so the more places adapt their marketing practices to this insight, the more we may call these practices "mature". These three elements – i.e. a greater

focus on complexity and integration of measures, openness to social dialogue and the diversity of local stakeholders, and sensitivity to unique place characteristics – we consider to be key defining elements of place marketing maturity.

We aim to identify the spatial differentiation of the degree of maturity of place marketing in Polish TSGUs. We operationalise the concept of maturity in two ways: the maturity of marketing offering and the maturity of marketing policies. Aware of the quantitative research gap in the place branding literature (McCann, 2009; Niedomysl & Jonasson, 2012), we carried out a comprehensive survey of practitioners that covered operations in all territorial units of Poland. Our survey targeted territorial units at each level of governance in Poland (2,473 communes, 380 counties and 16 regions; the response rate was 67%).

The following section focuses on a literature review, including partnership and complexity as critical elements of place marketing maturity. In the methodology section, we operationalise our approach to measuring maturity in two ways, through marketing offering and policy. We present and describe the results in the subsequent section. Our paper concludes with a discussion section, highlighting the implications for place branding policy and TSGU governance. The last section concludes.

2. Theoretical background

Place marketing is a relatively new field of academic research (Ashworth & Voogd, 1990; Ward, 1998). Initially dominated by the promotional aspects, it shifted in the 1990s towards a more strategic framework for place marketing (Zenker et al., 2013). In the new millennium, the debate on place marketing was broadened to include branding issues (Kotler, 2005), where place brand is defined as a network of associations based on the visual, verbal, and behavioural expression of a place and its stakeholders (Zenker & Braun, 2017).

Place marketing employs business-sector practices, primarily by adjusting the offering for cities, regions, countries to the needs of their "clients", i.e., residents, organisations, individuals. However, such places offering mainly goods of a public

nature, which strongly differentiates place branding from a commercial approach (Sokołowicz, 2016). What is more, place marketing should be, first and foremost, tailored to the specificity of the territorial units. Territory is not a merely physical space, and studying it is not only about “studying places” but also about “studying a sense of the place” (Perroux, 1950; Pike, 2011). It should be interpreted in terms of economic and social relations (Tuan, 1977). This territorological perspective on place branding assumes “(a) territory is a product of human and institutional relations, having both spatial and relational implications” (Warnaby, 2018). It should be, as Brighenti (2010) suggests, better conceived as “an act or practice rather than an object or physical space”.

The evolution of promotional and marketing activities is reflected in their growing complexity but also in how they are enriched with psychological and emotional factors (Govers, 2013). This is in line with Hospers’ (2011) observation that the most important difference between product and place marketing has to do with the nature of territories. It is based more on emotion and attachment to the place and the fact that individuals react to a place emotionally rather than rationally (Tuan, 1974). Building a place brand should not be a reduction, because reduction kills the spirit of the place. It should be perceived more as a distillation, i.e. exposing what is most important in the specificity of a given place (Anholt, 2010). Thus, marketing communication itself is usually not enough to influence public perceptions about places (Anholt, 2008). Traditional brand communication does not seem to work if it is not supported by physical transformations of the city and positive word-of-mouth activities (Braun et al., 2014).

A territory-based approach to place branding accounts for the extensive involvement of local stakeholders. Thus, while local public authorities were previously the main initiators, leaders and operators of marketing activities, place branding and place marketing are nowadays more partnership-based. In the process of brand creation, the locus moves from the company–advertising–consumer nexus to a multiple-stakeholder nexus (Lucarelli, 2018), engaging private organisations, societal organisations, residents and visitors (Braun et al., 2018). As a result, place branding is the subject

of networked governance of various local actors, stakeholders and institutions (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2016). This multiplicity of stakeholders represents the complexity of interests and, depending on the types of activities, stakeholders may either help or hinder their accomplishment. Moreover, as Braun et al. (2018) hypothesise, stakeholder involvement and brand territorialisation help reduce local conflicts. Brand results from communication tools being used successfully and public awareness of them being enabled. It relies on citizens’ ability to make quick judgments based on heuristics and cognitive abbreviations (Marland et al., 2017). Thus, public branding is an active, targeted and coordinated effort by all key stakeholders who, in the deliberation process, control the key elements (such as place, organisation, politics, culture) of communication processes in a territory (Zavattaro et al., 2021). Moreover, a brand is sustainable when it supports minimising potential conflicts and when benefits are matched with audiences and at the same time supported by a positive user experience (Marland et al., 2017).

The interdisciplinary and multi-stakeholder nature of place marketing and place branding is also stressed by Lucarelli (2012) and Lucarelli & Hallin (2015), emphasising the necessity of a non-linear, cultural and performative approach. It suggests that studying marketing activities in TSGU cannot be captured by a single method. Modern marketing performance is a balancing act and a struggle to find the right balance between universal solutions (often, unfortunately, superficial and even harmful to territorial uniqueness), and it highlights the exceptional nature of local contexts (Massey, 2005; Lury, 2009).

For the above reasons, we consider it appropriate to use two separate approaches to measure the level of marketing maturity. The first one emphasises the benefits of the multi-stakeholder perspective and social inclusion. Therefore, the maturation of the offering is understood here as the evolution of practitioners’ mindsets over time, from simple promotional tools, through the relevance of (dynamically changing) needs identification to building skills of mastering territorial uniqueness. In the second approach, we analyse place marketing maturity through the lenses of the three pillars of branding effectiveness (Anholt, 2010): 1. Strategy,

2. Substance, and 3. Symbolic actions. The first element refers to the reflexive, deliberated, long-term perspective for action. Substance, on the other hand, refers to applying concrete economic, legal, political, social, cultural and educational tools that make the strategy work. While multiple and repeatable across many years, symbolic actions are the culmination of all the marketing efforts. On their own, each of these elements is nothing but a single ineffective action. Thus, the substance must be coupled with strategy and frequent symbolic actions to result in an enhanced reputation. While there is a tendency in the commercial sphere to spread a clear and straightforward image of specific products or services, it does not work for places (Ginesta and de San Eugenio, 2020: 635). Anholt stressed the multifactorial character of place branding and its complexity as valuable attributes for any region, city or country (Anholt, 2007, 2009).

3. Material and research methods

3.1. Data collection and research operationalisation

We collected data from the experts committed to marketing activities in territorial self-government units. Among them were the managers of larger organisational units within public offices (as in larger TSGUs) or the one-person positions responsible for promotion or local development. In the official request to participate in the study, we asked for a questionnaire filled out by persons dealing with promotion and marketing activities in the broad sense. We left it to the office to decide who to appoint as the specific lead person. The data collection protocol was targeted to all territorial self-government units in Poland – 2,473 communes, 380 counties (included: 314 poviats and 66 cities with poviat rights) and 16 regions. We obtained responses from 1,911 (67%) TSGU of which: 1,822 were communes (74% of all communes), 251 (66%) were counties and 10 (63%) were regions. We surveyed the experts to assess (on a ten-point scale) the extent and scope of TSGUs' marketing activities in the following aspects: the uniqueness of their offering, the uniqueness of the tools used, the target groups, the geographical range of

activities, the number of stakeholders involved in formulating local and regional marketing policies, how formalised the marketing strategy is, the regularity of actions undertaken, staff competences, the size of the promotion budget, and an assessment of the perceived effects of their activities. The questionnaire included 22 questions to be answered on a ten-point linear scale (from 1 to 10), and these were designed to elicit self-assessment of marketing actions undertaken by each TSGU (Appendix A). The surveys were carried out between 01.12.2018 and 01.03.2019.

Four hypotheses were adopted for the survey:

1. The maturity of place marketing is hindered by the lack of a systemic approach in the TSGU. (H1)
2. The maturity of place marketing is hindered by the lack of sensitivity to territorial specificities in the TSGU (it is territorially indifferent). (H2)
3. The level of territorial division determines similarities among the TSGU in the evaluation of their maturity. (H3)
4. Physical distance determines similarities in terms of the declared and actual effects of TSGUs' marketing activities (H4).

3.2. Maturity of marketing offering

While building the scale of marketing offering maturity, we distinguished the following levels:

1. Excellence in implementing marketing tools
2. Excellence in identifying needs
3. Excellence in partnership and territorialisation

These levels were identified based on a questionnaire addressed to practitioners in Polish local governments. We asked experts to assess (on a ten-point scale) the extent and scope of a TSGU's marketing activity (Appendix A). To equalise the power of the indicators' impact at each of the three levels, we weighted them according to their number in each group (Table 1). The sum of the weights for each level of marketing offering maturity (column) remains equal to 1. Thanks to this, we ensure

that each level is equally important for the study, regardless of how many questions it contains

For taxonomical reasons, we based the cut-off points for the above classification, referring to the median value, which was 5. We assumed a TSGU might not achieve any level of maturity if, at the first level, the sum of the indices is less than 5. It

may also not reach the second level of maturity if the sum of the indices at the first level is greater than or equal to 5 but smaller than 5 at the second level. Likewise, a TSGU may not reach the third level of maturity if the sum of the indices at the first and second levels is equal to or greater than 5 but smaller than 5 at the third level (Table 2).

Table 1. Assigning survey questions to levels of marketing offering maturity

Scale of marketing offering maturity	1. Excellence in implementing marketing tools	2. Excellence in identifying needs	3. Excellence in partnership and territorialisation
	3	2	1
	4	6	9
	5	8	16
Survey question numbers	11	10	19
	13	15	21
	14	17	-
	20	18	-
	22	-	-
Weights	0.125	0.143	0.2

Source: own study

Table 2. Maturity levels of place marketing offering by value of sum of indices

Level	Description	Logical formula
0	Immature marketing offering	"I" < 5
I	Excellence in implementing marketing tools	"I" ≥ 5 ∧ "II" < 5
II	Excellence in identifying needs	"I" ≥ 5 ∧ "II" ≥ 5 ∧ "III" < 5
III	Excellence in partnership and territorialisation	"I" ≥ 5 ∧ "II" ≥ 5 ∧ "III" ≥ 5

Source: own study

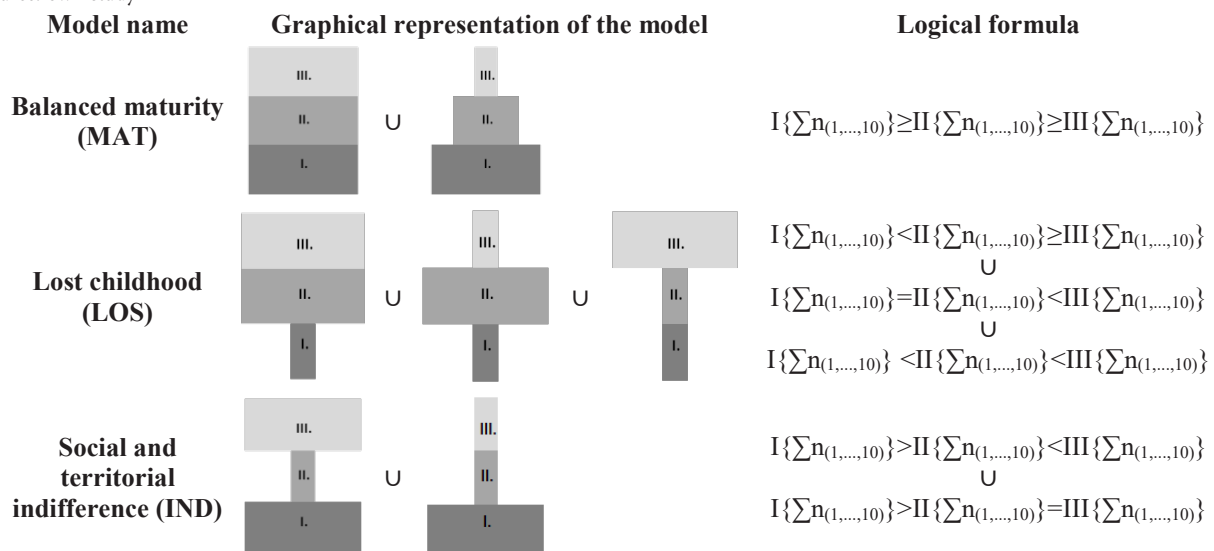


Fig. 1. The synergy logic of marketing activities according to Anholt

Source: author's own work

Table 3. Survey questions allocation to logical sets of marketing policy maturity

Marketing policy maturity	1. Strategy	2. Substance	3. Symbolic Actions
	6	1	19
	8	7	21
	10	11	22
Survey question numbers	13	14	
	15	20	
	17		
	18		

Source: own study

Table 4. Image of TSGU by types of units and characteristics

Type	Number of responses (n=1822)	Basic features (% of responses)					
		Mature	Young	Attractive	Unattractive	Conservative	Modern
Municipal commune	233	61	24	82	5	22	67
Urban–rural commune	450	65	20	83	4	27	59
Rural commune	1139	66	19	77	8	32	53
County	251	53	27	77	4	32	49
Region	10	5	4	8	1	1	8

Source: own study

3.3. Maturity of marketing policy

We decided to adopt Anholt's classification (2010) for three reasons. First, it can handle the large amount of data obtained from a large sample of questionnaires. The Venn diagram allows clear interpretations and provides opportunities for comparisons. Second, we found no other attempt to confront this classification with empirics, so we decided to make this attempt ourselves. Third, the classification makes it possible to capture the spatial differences in a readable manner. Unlike the Marketing Maturity scale, this one is not gradational but identifies intersections. We built a scale by allocating responses to 15 questions from the questionnaire (Appendix A) to three sets of variables: 1. Strategy, 2. Substance, and 3. Symbolic actions (Table 4).

Using operations on sets, we created an eight-element set of the following possible configurations of TSGU marketing activities: 1. Anonymity, 2. Propaganda, 3. Incoherence, 4. Spin, 5. Technocracy, 6.

Failure, 7. Maturity, and 8. Apparent activities. The adopted logic allowed us to identify the optimum level (of full maturity), which is the intersection of all three logical sets (Fig. 2). Marketing maturity interpreted along these lines most robustly reveals the factors underpinning a TSGU's maturity and a place's uniqueness. Contrary to the set of TSGUs whose marketing policy is fully mature (the intersection of all three sets), the remaining territorial self-government units may be in the intersection of two or just one set only. They also may display some evidence of marketing maturity, but there is no foundation to classify them as fully mature. "Apparent activities" is a unique set as it includes those territorial self-government units whose marketing activities are minimal; thus, they cannot be allocated to any of the three above specified areas of marketing activity (Strategy, Substance, or Symbolic actions). This set comprises TSGUs for which the sums of the indices are smaller than half of the potentially highest value on the scale, i.e., less than 5.

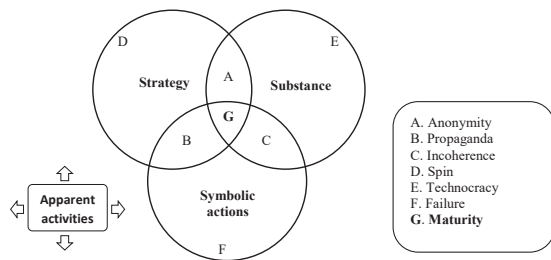


Fig. 2. The synergy logic of marketing activities according to Anholt

Source: Own study, based on Anholt (Anholt, 2010: 15–17).

4. Results

Our study revealed that all regions and 31% of communes and counties have been engaged in marketing activities since their very inception. Self-governments in communes have been pursuing marketing activities for, on average, not less than 14 or 15 years, while, for counties, the period ranges between 17 and 19 years. Marketing activities at the local level are most often pursued in the following

areas: culture (52% of respondents), tourism (32%), fairs and exhibitions (27%), investment (25%), sports and leisure (21%), and housing (11%) (Fig. 3). The situation in counties is almost identical, while regions focus on marketing that supports investment activities, tourism and culture.

Irrespective of the type and size, communes view themselves as mature in marketing activity (over 60% of responses). They define themselves as attractive (ca. 80% of responses), though not necessarily modern. Only urban communes relatively often declare that they are modern (67% of answers in this group). Other communes make no references to being modern or declare that they are conservative. Counties are also conservative. More than one third of them do not use the term “attractive” to describe themselves, and a further one third of TSGUs see themselves as “young” (i.e., inexperienced, experimenting, interested in novelties, exploring). Regional self-governments visibly declare themselves to be modern units (Table 4).

TSGUs that perceive themselves to be conservative are much more inclined to admit that

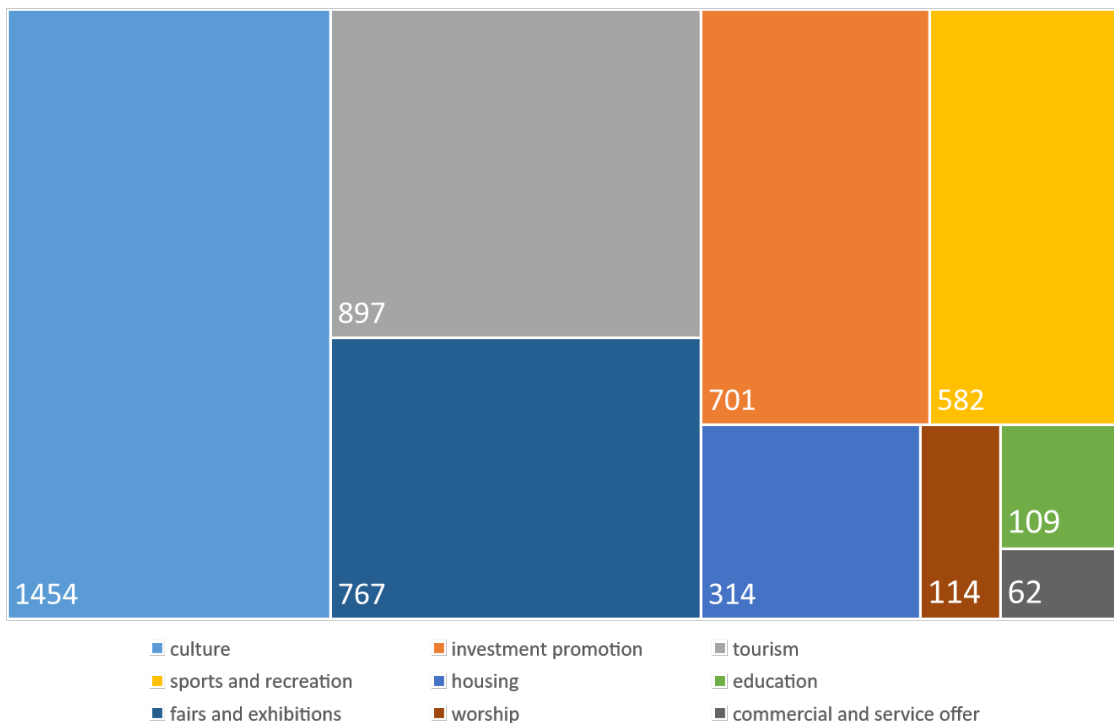


Fig. 3. The fields of TSGU marketing activities in Poland by the number of responses

Source: Own study

Table 5. Image of a conservative vs modern TSGU

Type of image	Number of responses	Basic features (% of responses)				Type of commune (% of responses)		
		Mature	Young	Attractive	Unattractive	Municipal commune	Urban-rural commune	Rural commune
Communes (n=1564)								
Conservative	540	85	13	80	17	9	22	68
Modern	1024	69	28	95	3	15	26	59
Counties (n=203)								
Conservative	80	64	34	88	11			
Modern	123	65	33	97	1			
Regions (n=9)								
Conservative	1	0	1	0	1			
Modern	8	5	3	8	0			

Source: own study

Table 6. The maturity of place marketing offering in Polish TSGUs

Level	Name of level:	Commune		County		Region
0	Immature marketing offering	810	49%	66	28%	1
I	Excellence in tools	381	23%	67	28%	0
II	Excellence in defining needs	70	4%	13	5%	0
III	Excellence in partnership and territorialisation	389	24%	94	39%	9

Source: own study

they are unattractive (almost one fifth of responses from communes). At the same time, modern units are almost always convinced that they are attractive or youthful (Table 5).

Those marketing Polish TSGUs draw a picture of themselves as disinclined to compete vigorously, conservative and restrained in their strategic attitude. However, it is hard to ascertain whether this is the cause or effect of their marketing maturity. Thus, methodology-wise, further in-depth quantitative studies were conducted to identify the degree of maturity of place marketing using two research models: marketing offering maturity and marketing policy maturity.

4.1. Maturity of marketing offering of Polish TSGUs

The marketing offerings of 24% of self-governments barely reach the first level of maturity (Excellence

in implementing marketing tools). We found that 4% of the TSGUs can be found at the second level (Excellence in identifying needs). On the other hand, as much as 26% of TSGUs in Poland reach the third level of marketing offering maturity (Excellence in territorialising the offering and building partnerships). These results reveal, firstly, a considerable weakness in building a more direct relationship between the TSGUs' marketing offering and development policy. Secondly, although TSGUs have developed the ability to highlight endogenous potential when creating their marketing offering, they have difficulty defining their marketing needs. It seems that the studied units did not possess the expected ability to integrate marketing activities into the broader context of their public policies.

The biggest share of self-governments with a top-level mature marketing offering (Excellence in partnership and territorialisation) can be found amongst voivodeships (90% of units). The

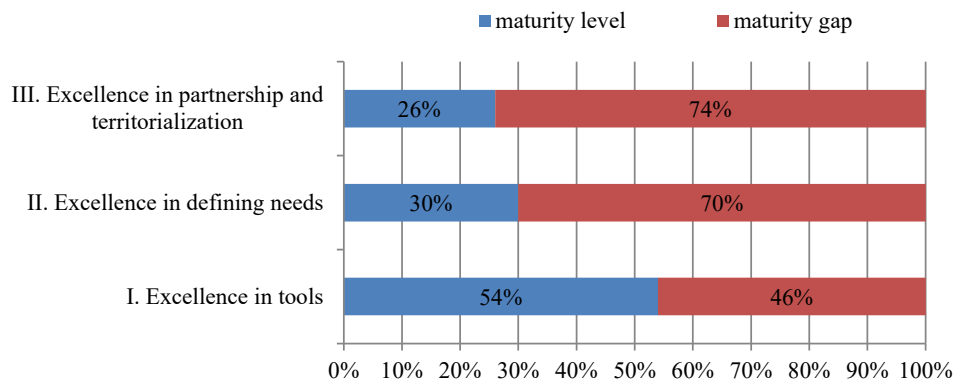


Fig. 4. The gap in the maturity of the place marketing offer in Polish TSGUs

Source: Own study

Table 7. Polish TSGUs by model of place marketing offering maturity

TSGU tiers	Model					
	Balanced maturity (MAT)		Lost childhood (LOS)		Social and territorial indifference (IND)	
Commune	406	25%	336	20%	908	55%
County	73	30%	35	15%	132	55%
Region	2		5		3	

Source: own study

share of county self-governments is also relatively high (39%), while only one in four communes demonstrates top-level maturity (Table 6).

Moreover, all levels exhibit maturity gaps – understood here as the percentage of TSGU that have not reached a particular level of maturity. At the first level (Excellence in tools), the maturity gap concerns almost half of the surveyed TSGUs (46%); at the second level (Excellence in defining needs), it affects 70% of the TSGUs and, at the third level (Excellence in partnership and territorialisation), 74% (Fig. 4).

For a clear majority of local self-governments, the maturity of their marketing offering can be described with the IND model (55% of TSGUs). The maturity of place marketing offerings of regional self-governments has mainly evolved in line with the LOS model (50% of units). The most desirable model of maturity – MAT – can be found in only one in four communes, one in three counties and just two regions (Table 7).

As far as the spatial distribution of place marketing maturity is concerned, we observed a relationship between the level of maturity and the historical development path of the regions. The areas that are much less skilful in place marketing are those that found themselves under Russian rule during the Partitions of Poland, i.e., in the part of the country that was least developed in the 19th century. Counties and communes from regions that were incorporated into Prussia and the Austrian Empire (which were more advanced in terms of industrialisation and urbanisation) are today achieving higher levels of marketing offering maturity (Fig. 5).

We also observed a horizontal clustering between TSGUs at the same level of administrative division. Also, cities and districts around large cities achieve a higher level of maturity. Over 46% of TSGUs have reached the highest level of maturity (Excellence in partnership and territorialisation), while for rural communes the percentage is 14%. The maturity

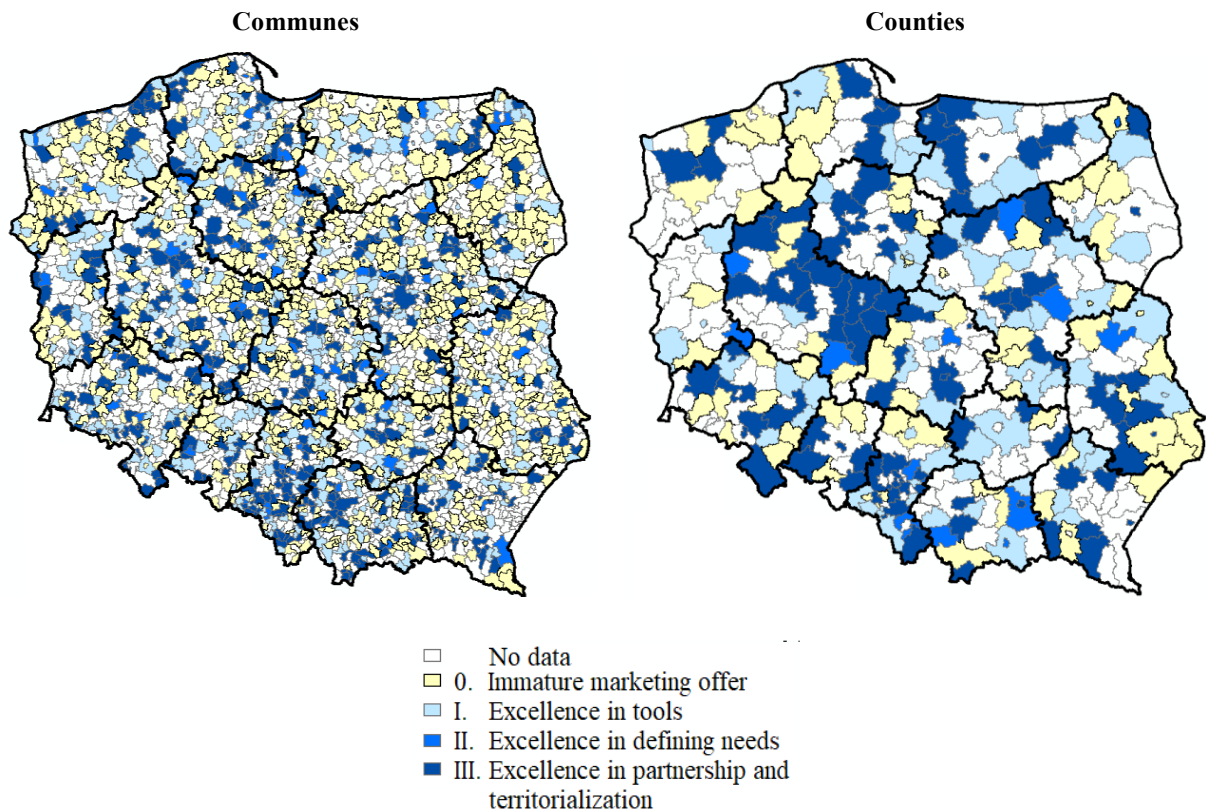


Fig. 5. Geographical representation of place marketing offer maturity in Polish TSGUs

^a The level of regions was not presented as 9 out of 10 reached the highest level of maturity.

^b The results of the analysis along with the names of individual administrative units are presented in supplementary materials – Appendix C.

Source: Own study

model is similar for towns and villages (the maturity of approx. 22% of both urban and rural communes has evolved in accordance with the MAT model).

4.2. Maturity of marketing policy of Polish TSGUs

The level of maturity of Polish TSGU marketing policies is also relatively low. Only 24% of them can be viewed as mature with regard to the implementation of the marketing policy. The “Maturity” group includes 91 counties (38%), 400 communes (24%), and 9 regions (90%) (Fig. 6; Appendix B).

Rural communes prevail in the group of mature communes. However, looking at the share of results in the various types of communes, marketing policy maturity has been achieved by 48% of municipalities, 29% of urban–rural communes,

and as little as 14% of rural communes. The vast majority of communes, counties and regions that are mature in terms of their marketing offerings describe themselves as modern units that represent features attributed to the colours green and blue (Table 8). A deep divergence in marketing maturity can be observed amongst TSGUs at both county and commune levels. In other words, TSGUs at the same administrative level do not exhibit similarities in the maturity of their marketing activities. This leads to the rejection of hypothesis H3.

The clustering of maturity levels depends on the types of TSGU. Similarities for neighbouring TSGUs were identified for regions and counties. Out of the 91 units in the Maturity group, 67 are immediate neighbours of at least one county from the same group. At the regional (voivodeship) level, eight out of the nine self-governments from the Maturity set directly neighbour their counterparts. However, the clustering of maturity cannot be confirmed

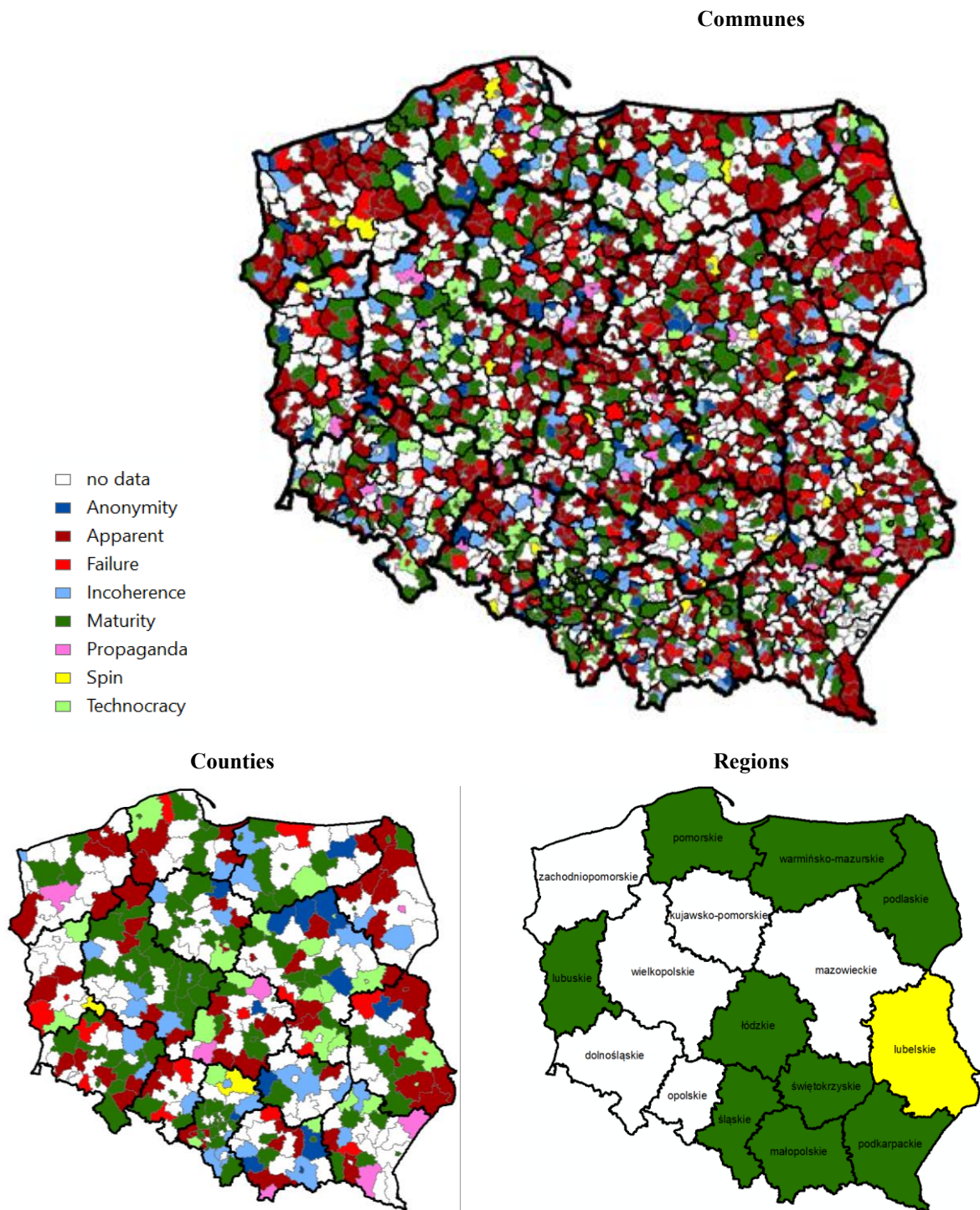


Fig. 6. Geographical representation of place marketing policy maturity in Polish TSGUs

^a A detailed spatial distribution for each level of territorial subdivision is given in Appendix B.

^b The results of the analysis along with the names of individual administrative units are presented in supplementary materials – Appendix C.

Source: Own study

Table 8. Structure of place marketing policy maturity levels by TSGU types

Maturity sets	Commune			County (%)	Region (%)
	Municipal (%)	Urban–rural (%)	Rural (%)		
G. Maturity	48	29	14	38	90
A. Anonymity	3	4	4	7	0
Apparent activities	19	33	46	24	0
F. Failure	7	6	7	6	0
C. Incoherence	12	10	6	12	0
B. Propaganda	0,4	1	2	3	0
D. Spin	1	1	2	1	10
E. Technocracy	6	8	7	10	0
Total	233	450	1139	240	10

Source: own study

for communes. Thus, we conclude that hypothesis H4 is verified positively only at the regional and county levels, while we rejected it at the local level (communes). The influence of proximity on the convergence of marketing practice is visible at the level of upper-tier territorial units but it is not present in communes as basic TSGUs in Poland.

The biggest number of communes belong to the set labelled “Apparent activities”. Both the communes and counties from this group are usually peripheral relative to regional capitals. By contrast, units whose marketing policy is mature are usually close to their regional capitals (Fig. 6; Appendix B).

Going forward, for the other sets that reflect the maturity of marketing policy, space-determined regularities are rather weak or inconclusive. For example, the group of TSGUs engaged in marketing activities in a rather uncoordinated way (Incoherence) includes 12% of counties and 8% of communes, with one in five units being a municipal commune. Also, relatively many units – 10% of counties and 7% of communes (including 12% of towns) – carry out marketing activities not founded on any strategic idea or leading projects (Technocracy). Such TSGUs are usually situated at the peripheries of regions. Only 3% of counties and 1% of communes declare a strategic approach to their marketing policy. There is also a group bringing together 6% of counties and 7% of communes (including 13% of towns), whose marketing activities comprise unplanned, incidental acts that are unable to produce any synergy effects (Failure) (Fig. 6; Appendix B).

5. Discussion

The vast majority of Polish TSGUs are involved in marketing activities. However, few of them realise the need for a systemic and multi-stakeholder approach. The small number of TSGUs that we classified as mature in both the offering-based and policy-based methods prompts us to reject hypothesis H1. The marketing offering of Polish TSGUs is also mostly territorially indifferent. This means that we cannot reject hypothesis H2, that the maturity of place marketing in Poland is hindered by the TSGUs’ lack of sensitivity to territorial specificity. Also, the performance of self-governments in communes is the poorest, and county self-governments do slightly better, while regions’ self-governments exhibit a relatively high level of maturity.

According to Niedomysl and Jonasson (2012), three factors determine the possible recognition of other territories as direct competitors in marketing-related activities: 1. Position in the hierarchy of power, 2. Geographical distance, and 3. Level of place marketing. They hypothesise that the imitation of place marketing approaches will occur more readily among places in similar positions in the hierarchy of power. This led us to analyse two other hypotheses, concerning, respectively:

1. Similarities in marketing activity and its maturity within the same level of administration (and absolute population size and ranking by population size)
2. The effect of spatial distance on behavioural patterns in marketing activities, in line with

Tobler's First Law of Geography (Tobler, 1970).

Our analysis led us to reject hypothesis H3, since the results did not reveal the impact of the hierarchy of power on similarity. Such a relationship was not identified for the present maturity level of the marketing offering or the marketing policy in the TSGUs in Poland. In Poland, local self-governments (communes) have the most extensive range of self-government among the three levels of local self-government units. The scope of public tasks they perform and measures for their implementation determine the scope of local community self-government. We recognised communes as the most representative group of local governments in Poland. At the same time, it is the largest group of local governments. Therefore, we based the conclusion regarding hypothesis H4 on the results obtained for communes. Hence, we rejected hypothesis H4 about physical distance determining similarities in declared and actual outcomes of Polish TSGUs' marketing activities. It confirmed the results obtained for TSGUs' marketing policy maturity and the maturity of the marketing offering. Geographical proximity does not translate into institutional proximity as defined by Boschma (2005). Instead, it is a barrier to transmitting knowledge and good practices, including in place branding. We observed that an important challenge is the relatively low level of cooperation between neighbouring TSGUs. It appears that greater coordination between communes of different types and scales – especially within urban agglomerations – will improve the effectiveness of place branding and territorial governance in general. Finally, our study revealed that relatively few Polish TSGUs are mature in being aware of their unique potency. This provides a starting point for recommending more territorially specific measures in place-marketing practice in Poland.

It is also worth pointing out that the spatial differences in place marketing we revealed also derive from historical development trajectories. On the one hand, this indicates the petrification of spatial structures in the long term. In Poland, this spatio-temporal continuity is revealed primarily through the enduring socio-economic consequences of the partition of Poland between the three superpowers

(Russia, Prussia and Austria) in the 19th century (Kowalski et al., 2018; Kowalski, Matera and Sokołowicz, 2020; Churski et al., 2021), the specific problems of certain regions (Śleszyński et al., 2017), the dominance of a few particular urban centres, e.g., the level of their migration attractiveness in the long term (Śleszyński, 2020), or the level of spatial landscape differentiation observed in the analysis of satellite photos (Śleszyński & Solon, 2017).

6. Conclusions

TSGUs are not private-sector entities; hence, market mechanisms apply to them to only a limited extent. Nevertheless, marketing understood as a management function and as a tool that supports the efficiency with which development projects are delivered can be applied in the public sector. Self-government units in Poland have successfully adapted marketing tools to the specificity of the public sector. However, we have now identified a relatively small number of the most mature Polish TSGUs; rather average units, or those using repetitive solutions, prevail. Perhaps large self-government territorial units, especially cities, are growth poles and their place marketing performance remains strong. In this case, it is worth promoting their relatively equal distribution in Poland and supra-local recognisability by highlighting distinctive features. On the other hand, smaller TSGUs should by no means be disgraced by their slightly less prominent role in marketing processes. On the contrary, they should bet on their uniqueness and show that the grass is just as green there as elsewhere. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of small TSGUs should join forces in clusters of shared specificities.

We also found that going against the historical paths of development is counterproductive. TSGUs should build place-marketing strategies based on their specific advantages and, paradoxically, even on factors that today are considered weaknesses. And finally, marketing competences and performance are strongly determined by the economic situation of TSGUs and their population-size rankings. It is the economic situation and the proximity of strong growth poles, rather than the hierarchy of power,

that most strongly determines place-marketing effectiveness. Sometimes, the sky IS the limit.

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