

THE DETERMINANTS OF THE TOURIST IMAGE OF THE CITY – AN EXAMPLE OF ŁÓDŹ

Abstract

The image of the city is a widespread research topic among scientists from various disciplines and practitioners operating, for example, on behalf of local government, institutions, or companies. Due to the previous experience and education of the author, the studies included in that doctoral thesis focus on the image of a place (strictly – a city) from the tourist's perspective.

In the methodological assumption, the task is to fill the research gap on the importance of time in shaping the image of a place and thus define an image as a continuous process, not as a completed phenomenon. For this purpose, the author decided to carry out research with tourists over a longer period than usually it is done - from the first stage (before the trip), through its implementation (journey), to a "remembered" stage (a few months after taking it).

The choice of the location of the image research, i.e. Łódź, is not accidental. Due to its history and difficult post-socialist transformation, the city is willingly discussed in research about image - usually as a negative example.

The thesis is a mix of several currents of research - geographical, sociological, and economical. To achieve the assumed goals and verify the hypotheses, the author decided to use the triangulation of research methods, hoping that studying the phenomenon in different ways, and from different points of view would provide a complete picture of the issue sought.

The main research method was an in-depth interview with tourists, conducted during three stages of the journey. The most important assumption of interviews was, that every time the interview template was identical, the same issues were repeated, and partially identical questions were asked, to be able to assess the change (or lack thereof) in the opinions of the examined person. Due to the methodological difficulty, in the literature on tourism and geography, it is relatively rare to find such a panel method of research, with the same person at several stages. The study was successfully conducted with 24 respondents, which, taking into account the qualitative and panel nature of the research, was a successful result.

The first interview took place before the trip (by phone), to reveal the original image of the city and investigate the determinants that may affect it. People who did not know Łódź well were chosen to participate in the research. It can be concluded, that their image of the city was not distorted by personal experiences. Moreover, some of the people even did not plan to travel to the city, but firstly agreed to participate in the research, and after that, they started preparations for a journey. Thus, in these few cases, the trip to Łódź was a kind of sociological experiment. At first, the perceived image of the city is generally very choppy and hazy. Tourists are not sure about their ideas, they have chaotic visions. The main determinant is information sources - e.g. media, friends' opinions, and school knowledge. There are many stereotypes and misconceptions. Tourists are aware of their fragmentary and poor knowledge. The multitude of factors and conditions which influenced the city's image is extremely interesting. Often, the specific image is caused by some spontaneous and random events or shreds of information.

The second interview was conducted during the stay in the city (personally, not by phone). This part was planned for the end of tourists' stay in the city. Some of the interviews were conducted, for example, even at a railway station, just before departure. The main objective was to find out what is remembered the most, without any memory filters. The interview done directly after experience ensures a fresh image of the known and visited the city. The respondents stayed in Łódź for at least two days (the condition of taking part in the research was to spend at least one night). During this time, they could form their own opinion about the city and verify the images created before. The image at this stage varies from the perceptions before the trip. Tourists have a very sharp, precise image. There has been a large increase in the confidence in judgments, the respondents have also a lot of new knowledge. They are not afraid to express themselves like experts. The image is also very emotional and lively.

The third interview took place 3 months after the journey to Łódź. That period allowed the subjects to distance themselves from the emotional elements and the interview, in the author's assumption, provided information on what tourists exactly remembered, and what was their "final" image of the city. Once more, for logistical reasons (tourists came from different places in Poland), the survey was conducted by phone. Compared to the previous stage, tourists' impressions have cooled down a bit. The image was subdued, and rational. It became a synthesis of what was before the arrival and that during the stay. The impressions were verified and sorted out through the whole cycle of the journey.

In total, nearly 40 hours of interviews were conducted, the transcription of which took over 730 A4 pages of typescript. Such a huge amount of valuable material turned out to be a great interpretation challenge.

Another method in the work was a query of existing materials about the city and its image. To be able to compare Łódź with other, similar metropolises, an analogous work was also carried out for the largest cities in Poland. The author has delimited and marked out the boundaries of the metropolitan zone for the main Polish cities, to be able to compare them. As that zone has been chosen the most important area for the city's identity, also an area explored by tourists and the most valuable urban tissue. The comparisons and analyses, required advanced cartographic work using specialized ArcGis software. As a result, it turned out that Łódź has a very large metropolitan zone, so tourists may have difficulties getting to know even the most representative part of the city, and thus the process of creating an image may be different for them (then in the case of cities with a larger accumulation of attractions).

The next research method was the analysis of photos taken by tourists during their stay in Łódź. After the trip, each of them was asked to send the researcher three photographs that (in their opinion) best reflect their stay in the city. All the photographs were after that very carefully analyzed by the author according to several criteria. The places where the photos were taken and the objects photographed were assessed, and the results transformed into a map of the "space explored by tourists".

After correlating this with the location of tourist attractions and the boundaries of the metropolitan zone, it allowed to estimate where, in the case of Łódź, tourists move and what they visit. The photographs were also examined in terms of the elements that were found in them - for example, it turned out that a lot of them show elements of street art, which was an interesting piece of information about the perception of Łódź by visitors. The author also looked at the photos through the prism of the author - what the captured photo says about the creator. In addition, summarized statistics were prepared on all photos, which served as an interesting conclusion (e.g., how many

photos were taken during the day, or how many are presented by the most important tourist attractions, etc.)

There are 3 research hypotheses in the paper. The first one concerned tourists' image of the city. The author assumed that this one varies with time and differs depending on the stages of the journey. The conducted research verified this hypothesis positively. For the same people (tourists), the image was different at each stage. There were other determinants, emotional markings, and features of such an image. It can be assumed that the image after the journey is a certain synthesis of those from before the arrival and those directly experienced during the stay.

The second hypothesis concerned Łódź directly and stated that the negative or neutral image of the city improves after a stay and is positive (or at least neutral). This hypothesis was also positively verified. In the case of each of the interviewees and the respondents, the image of Łódź improved compared to the image that respondents had before going on a trip.

The third hypothesis concerned the issue of why the image of Łódź is worse than that of similar cities. It was assumed that it was influenced by the immediate proximity of infrastructure or socially degraded zones, with the most attractive spaces from the tourist's point of view. Such a neighborhood, in the author's assumption, could cause discomfort to the visitors and thus contradictory experiences. The hypothesis was only partially verified. It was confirmed that the problematic vicinity of tourist attractions is responsible for the negative impressions and image elements. At the same time, tourists generally had a positive image of the city before their departure, so the second part of the hypothesis about the negative image after their stay cannot be confirmed.

The work is divided into seven chapters. The first two are devoted to the review of the literature. The initial chapter focuses on presenting the complexity of the image phenomenon, its definition, and various research approaches. Particularly noteworthy is the multiplicity of definitions appearing in scientific works, relating to the meaning of the same. In the second chapter, the author presents the current research trends and shows what conclusions were reached by previous researchers on this phenomenon.

The third chapter presents the place of research - that is, the city of Łódź. The author, despite describing the city's history, is investigating the image of the city presented in the media, and its strengths and weaknesses to others. It ends with a presentation of the city's tourism space and the aforementioned comparisons of the metropolitan zones of Łódź and other cities.

The fourth chapter is crucial from the point of view of the whole thesis as it contains a very detailed analysis of all in-depth interviews. For clarity reasons, it is divided into three large subchapters covering the studied stages - before arrival, during the stay, and 3 months after the stay. Each of the subsections has the same structure, including the reveal of determinants, then features of the image, and finally specific observations about Łódź. Particularly interesting are respondents' answers to the tasks, for example, personifying the city (and describing it as a person) or quick, the spontaneous ending of sentences begun by the researcher (ex.: "Łódź is the capital of ...").

The fifth chapter of the work is an analysis of photos taken by respondents during their stay. Photos have been interpreted in terms of meanings, symbolism and, what is innovative, geographically - based on the location of the photographed object. The author discovered the exact location of each photo received from tourists and presented the results in the form of a map.

In the sixth chapter, an image of the city is considered as a process. The elements for individual stages were not analyzed, but for the whole journey together. Each respondent was examined

separately and it was analyzed whether the city's image changed in some way. As it was changing, analyzes were made of how these changes took place and what could have caused them.

The last chapter, the seventh, is a summary and collective presentation of the conclusions and results of the work.

The strength of the study is a large number of additional materials that organize information from the transcription of interviews, and present them in a clearer form. In the work, over 40 drawings, 20 tables, and more than 50 photographs were used.