

EMPLOYER BRANDING IN PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN POLAND. EXPLORATORY STUDY.

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Abstract

Research Purpose. The objective of this article is to delineate the conceptual and operational parameters of 'employer branding' within the context of research in private universities in Poland, i.e. Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs), through the lens of sustainable university management. The study has an exploratory purpose.

Design/Methodology/Approach. The research assumptions were developed based on the analysis of secondary sources. A quantitative method was used, consisting of a CAWI survey and direct, paper-based interviews. The sample size was determined based on the number of all 19 private academic universities in Poland at the time that were invited to participate in the study. Quantitative research was conducted from 2019 to 2022. The results were additionally verified using qualitative methods, observing the websites of private universities and five personal study visits. The qualitative research was conducted from October 2022 to June 2023.

Findings. A prevalent trend observed across all categories evaluated in the empirical investigations presented in the article permits the formulation of the assumption that respondents exhibit an absence of a definitive opinion regarding the issue of university employer branding.

Originality/Value/Practical Implications. The utilisation of employer branding as a contemporary instrument for the dissemination of an organisation's image is attributable to the limited propagation of this concept and its associated elements within the market milieu. This concept represents a relatively novel area of investigation, necessitating more intensive exploration. The research conducted facilitated the delineation of various aspects concerning both the external and internal representation of private academic universities' public image. Concurrently, new exploratory domains emerged.

Keywords: employer branding, higher education institution (HEI), academic branding, image, socially responsible management

JEL: I23, J44, M3, M12, M50

Introduction

At the outset of the 21st century, both practitioners and researchers have experienced an evolution in their approach to matters concerning image and reputation. The rising significance of human capital in organisational management, alongside the progressively expanding role of social and environmental considerations in the formulation and implementation of corporate strategies, with employee branding gaining increasing prominence.

Employer branding brings the disciplines of public relations (PR), marketing, human resources (HR), and brand management in a new conceptual framework, assuming the organisation is a brand, and employees can be perceived as clients who have an impact on its performance (Barrow & Mosley, 2005; Ciptagustia et al., 2023). Changes related to the image and reputation of organisations have also affected HEIs, which nowadays are competing for students and funds for research in a similar way to companies.

Consequently, the contemporary approach to image and reputation is equally applicable to private universities.

Each country has its own individual higher education system. There are both state and private universities in Poland. The former are financed from the state budget, and the latter must actively look for sources of financing so as not to rely solely on student fees. The relevance of this article stems from the fact that it concerns a pioneering research project; studies of this type have not been conducted in Poland before. Therefore, the findings contained therein allow us to define the research field and verify hypotheses resulting from analyses of the relevant literature. The additional topic of this article is to delineate the conceptual parameters of 'employer branding' within the context of private universities (Higher Educational Institutions - HEIs). The practical goal is also important: to demonstrate the need to build a university brand, emphasising the prestige of the academic profession in the context of "employer branding."

The main research goal of the study is to assess the use of organisational image in the strategic management of private academic institutions and to determine the range of applications of this tool in the analysed universities in Poland. The main goal has been concretised in the following specific objectives: 1. To assess the impact of internal image on the perception of Polish private academic institutions as good employers – employer branding. 2. To assess the impact of external image on the perception of private academic institutions as reputable places of education in Poland. 3. To identify factors influencing employee interest in and/or retention at private academic institutions in Poland. 4. To develop a comprehensive tool for empirically examining university image, with particular emphasis on the image of private academic institutions in Poland.

Research methods. In the first step, survey assumptions were developed based on secondary sources. In the second step, surveys were conducted using the CAWI method and in paper form. The research was conducted from October 2019 to October 2022. The sample size was determined by contacting all 19 private academic institutions. Ultimately, representatives from 11 private HEIs participated in the quantitative study. The study was conducted using a survey questionnaire, with 4 of the 27 questions dedicated to specific respondent groups (students or staff). A total of 669 surveys were received, 517 of which were completed correctly. The obtained results were further verified by observing university websites. The observations were conducted from October to December 2022. The final results were verified during study visits to 5 private universities from January to June 2023.

To the authors' knowledge, research on "employer branding" in private universities has not been conducted in Poland before, making the presented study pioneering. The results obtained can be used by other researchers to explore the issue of university branding in greater depth. However, during the preparatory phase, during the research, and during the post-research analyses, additional issues emerged that were not included in the initial research plan.

An interesting avenue of research would be to analyse the reputation of universities in the context of building an international brand aimed at potential international students. The context for such research is emerging in the context of the internationalisation of higher education across the European Union. A final line of research could be an interdisciplinary analysis of the importance of the visual identity of private HEIs. The researchers themselves were surprised to discover the importance of visual identity in the process of selecting and evaluating a private HEI as a place to study and work.

Literature Review

The presented study is exploratory because, as far as the authors know, at the time of its conduct, there was no research on the topic of "employer branding" in Polish private universities. Therefore, the research was based on the researchers' findings on this topic in general. The term 'employer branding' was used for the first time in 1990 (Barrow & Mosley, 2005). Over three decades have elapsed since that time; however, this concept remains in a developmental stage, and there is consequently no complete consensus on the advisability of engaging in efforts to construct an employer brand (Wojtaszczyk, 2010). The issue of employer image is analysed from various disciplines. Therefore, numerous approaches to this issue can be found in the literature, such as management sciences (Martin,

2008), marketing (Martin et. al., 2005), public relations (Edwards, 2005), and communication management (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Wojcik, 2015). Analysing the literature on the subject, one can also find research and analyses undertaken by psychologists, organisational psychologists, specialists dealing with the issue of organisational behaviour and communication sciences.

The multitude of research approaches also determines a significant number of definitions stating what specific activities of the organisation are concerned with (Edwards, 2010). Summarising the ways of defining employer branding, Edwards concludes that these are employer image campaigns that are intended to explain and manage the tangible and intangible aspects of employment in the organisation (Edwards, 2010). Consequently, this constitutes a process grounded in the organisation's communication with its social environment, aimed at elucidating all values deemed significant to both employees and prospective employees.

Nowadays, the growing importance of the idea of social responsibility, which considers respect for specific values related to human rights and labour rights, makes university graduates looking for jobs more and more aware of their rights and have specific expectations as to the values represented by the organisation to which they apply (Edwards, 2005; Larrán et al., 2017; Shek, 2017).

In conclusion, employer branding constitutes a strategic process aimed at constructing an employer's brand. The principal objective is to enhance the organisation's stature as an employer by demonstrating values inherent in its culture that differentiate the employer from others, as well as the emotional resonance associated with its organisational identity. Therefore, employer branding emphasises communication tools that specifically consider the values and norms significant to both current and prospective employees and other stakeholders including prospects and students. As a result, this process involves making efforts to ensure that organisational socialisation is conducive to building an integrated team of employees (Edwards, 2005). An important element of employee branding is the organisation's management strategy, which builds its image as an employer through quality and environmental policy, equal opportunities, respect for employee rights, career paths and development, motivation system, and the creation of an appropriate organisational climate (Kozłowski, 2012, 146–155).

Employer branding activities addressed to the external environment use public relations tools to a greater extent, although their main element is a job offer that will interest the best employees on the labour market (Hanin et al., 2013). However, the preparation of a job offer must be preceded by public relations activities that influence the way potential employees read the content of the job offer. Today, as research shows, employer profiles on social media are a vital source of information (Szczepański, 2013, 170). Maintaining a consistent message: employer brand, corporate brand, and consumer brand is a challenge for people managing employer branding. Challenges related to ethics determine in a special way not only the coherence of these brands, but above all their image integrity, i.e. regardless of what message (content and form) and to whom (stakeholder) it is addressed to, it must meet the principle of consistency - it is always the message of the same organisation operating based on the same values, mission, and vision. Maintaining this coherence is a challenge for every organisation.

In conclusion, employer branding constitutes a vital component of every organisation's operations due to the following reasons: a. the employer's brand is a significant aspect of the organisation's asset management, b. employer branding represents the process of conveying the core values of a given organisation, c. it serves as a strategy for attracting the essential employees and talent within the labour market, d. employer branding enhances the organisation's competitiveness and appeal, influences its reputation, and forms an integral part of its public image.

Understanding the employer branding process gives organisations the ability to create competitive advantages by attracting highly qualified job candidates and preventing current employees from leaving (Dobija et al., 2018). When considering the issue of employer branding in a private academic university, the specificity of its external and internal stakeholders should be emphasised.

The specificity of an organisation such as a university means that its internal stakeholders include both administrative staff and academic lecturers with their families, but also students, who are clients (especially clients of non-public universities), but when they start their studies, due to the long-term nature of this relationship, they also become part of the academic community. Consequently, initiatives

pertaining to the establishment of the internal image of universities are directed towards both constituencies and rely on the construction of an effective communication process. Malarski (2015) notes that the internal image of an organisation can be shaped in two ways: through purposeful communication activities, using tools appropriately selected on the basis of the information policy plan, but also this image can be created spontaneously, individually in the mind of each recipient. The perception formed in the minds of students and university employees constitutes a subjective reflection of reality, derived from evaluations based on experiences gained through routine engagement in university life. This image may change under the influence of various factors, whether intentional or accidental.

HEI branding is an emerging phenomenon (Biagoli), and for this reason, the adaptation of universities to modern management and marketing strategies is little explored. Suffice to say that Google Scholar returns only 97 results for the query "HEI branding" (accessed 04/12/2024). Also, review papers contain little source material (Nazaruddin Ali Basyah 2023) - 17 articles researched, (X. Yaping et al. 2023) - respectively 43 papers. Moreover, in the review by X. Yaping et al. (2023), only three articles consider employer branding as the area of the study.

On the other hand, an essential element in the overall assessment of the market image is the group of final recipients of the education process, i.e., current and potential students at the university. Their opinions, which are the result of positive activities of an organisation such as a university, complement the image on the market of the organisation. Similarly, the internal image will also be created in the minds of students, based on their own experiences and everyday observations of the employer (university) - employee (academic or administrative) relationship, thus creating an image of the university as a future, desirable employer of choice.

The complexity of the labour market in the educational sector should be taken into account when considering the employer branding of a private university. The basis for creating an employer image by private academic universities is the current situation on the labour market, which in the higher education industry in Poland is divided into two components: the labour market for academic teachers and the labour market for administrative employees. In the group of administrative employees, the trend of the current labour market, i.e. the employee market, continues. In turn, the current situation on the labour market in the group of academic teachers is very dynamic, determined by constantly changing legal provisions (Adamczyk, 2023). Currently, the value of an academic teacher is increasing, especially a scientifically active one who also has significant practical experience. This aspect is even more important because the role of universities is, among others, providing education in various forms, conducting scientific activities, educating and promoting university staff, as well as acting for the benefit of local and regional communities. Therefore, each university, including a private academic university, can fulfil this statutory provision only if it becomes an attractive employer attracting high-quality employees. In today's market conditions, a qualified and loyal employee brings enormous value to the company's brand and its daily operations, including the HEI (Kandefer & Mazurek, 2019).

In light of the aforementioned context, non-public HEIs in Poland are confronted with the challenge of constructing and enhancing their image, both externally and internally, as institutions that are attractive, stable, and esteemed. Such institutions endeavour to project an image of being a commendable employer, thereby facilitating not only the acquisition but also the crucial retention of valuable employees. Every major non-public academic university, is obliged to ensure employment stability by building a sense of belonging in all employee groups, which is one of the most important elements of managing its image, leading to building the perception of the university as a place where potential candidates not only want to study, but also identify with it as a place where they want to function on many levels, including scientific ones, and are proud of being part of this community. It should also be emphasised that internal stakeholders, in the form of administrative and academic teachers, also play a fundamental role in creating the external image of a university.

Therefore, taking into account the above considerations, it can be seen that managing the image of a non-public academic university, especially its image as an employer, allows the implementation of its goals, remaining in line with the mission of the entire system of higher education and science, which is

the conduct of the highest quality education and scientific activities, shaping civic attitudes, and participating in social development and creating an economy based on innovation (Zacłona, 2010).

In the pursuit of securing highly qualified administrative and academic educators at a private university, the following factors will hold significant importance:

- Employer Value Proposition (EVP) – the employer’s unique values,
- consistency of promise with reality,
- current responsive website,
- excellent internal employer branding,
- employee referral system,
- lecturer’s brand (image),
- visual identification system that allows the university to be clearly identified and distinguishing it from other entities.

Creating the image of a non-public academic university as an employer is a long-term process consisting of several stages that must be constantly verified and improved using marketing research. Their results, on the one hand, facilitate the planning of these activities, and on the other hand, enable control and assessment of their effectiveness and efficiency (Mazurek-Łopacińska & Sobocińska, 2011). The success of creating a brand of a respectable employer, such as a private academic university, especially one operating in the environment of large public academic institutions, depends on thoughtful, consistent and effective activities related to the use of individual employer branding tools. HEI is thus regarded as a brand that offers products within the realms of educational and research markets. Therefore, it is important to coordinate internal and external tools for creating the employer's image, while adapting messages to representatives of generations present on the labour market, also taking into account rankings and websites collecting opinions about employers (Spies & Wenger, 2024).

An examination of scholarly literature regarding employer branding within universities facilitated the formulation of these research inquiries:

1. What are the underlying reasons for selecting a private university as a venue for educational pursuits or employment?
2. What elements influence the perception of a private university's image?
3. How is the process of employer branding executed by private universities?

In summary, as the literature suggests, the concept of "employer branding" is relatively well-defined in relation to companies (corporations) but requires further clarification in the case of universities. The theses formulated in the cited literature tend to be postulates and theoretical assumptions stemming from general principles of good management. Due to the lack of existing research, it was necessary to conduct secondary research, such as "desk research," based on which the research method was selected, and the questionnaire questions were constructed.

Research Methodology

In pursuit of fulfilling the research objectives and addressing the inquiry, a survey was implemented utilizing both the Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) technique and traditional paper format, spanning from October 2019 to October 2022. The questionnaire encompassed multiple-choice questions that explored factors influencing specific facets of the higher education sector, including non-public academic institutions. Additionally, respondents evaluated the degree of intensity for each factor or motivator using a five-point scale.

Among the 19 non-public academic universities in Poland, representatives from eleven institutions participated in the study. The survey comprised two distinct respondent categories: students and graduates, and employees, which included administrative staff and academic lecturers. The employees were further categorised into those engaged under an employment contract and individuals conducting teaching activities under a civil-law contract. In total, 517 respondents contributed to the research, comprising 400 students and alumni (graduates), including 382 students and 16 graduates, alongside 117 employees, of whom 83 were academic lecturers, and 34 were administrative employees.

The intended target group was students. However, due to the relatively long duration of the research, some respondents who completed their studies during the study period were included in the alumni group. Qualitative analyses conducted after the study allow the authors to formulate the thesis that personal experience of studying (either during or after completion) is the most important factor unifying opinions about a given HEI, so the opinions of students and alumni in this case can be merged.

Upon examining the tenure duration within distinct cohorts, it is discernible that within the group of employees, out of 117 respondents, 107 maintain professional activity. A significant portion of these respondents, specifically those with 16-20 years of professional experience, represent one-quarter of this cohort (comprising 27 individuals). Conversely, within the group of students and graduates, among 400 respondents, 257 individuals are professionally active. Within this group, the predominant category consists of individuals with limited professional experience, spanning up to 5 years, accounting for 42%. The sample under study was selected through purposive sampling. The respondents were either actively pursuing education or had recently completed their studies at a private university, while the secondary group consisted of individuals employed at private universities.

Research Results

Of 400 students and graduates, the vast majority, as many as 74% of respondents, declared that they considered both public and private universities when choosing a university. At the same time, 1/4 of respondents declared that they only considered private universities. This distribution of answers may result from the fact that many respondents are beneficiaries only of non-public academic universities, to which this study was mainly addressed.

In one of the questions addressed to a group of students, respondents were asked about the factors influencing their decision, such as the appeal of the educational offers, the institution's capacity to confer doctoral degrees, the expertise and qualifications of the research and teaching personnel, the calibre of education provided, and the quality of infrastructure. Additionally, considerations included accommodations for individuals with disabilities, the institution's market perception, familial and social recommendations, proximity to the student's residence, tuition and ancillary costs, the institution's ranking status, and the availability of accurate information on the university's website. The breakdown of these responses is illustrated in Figure 1.

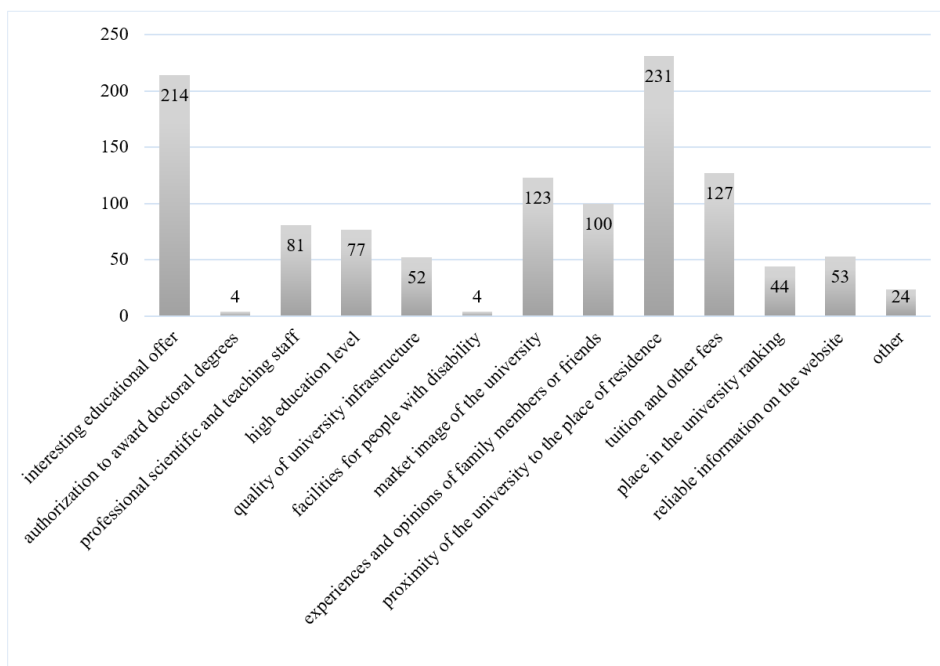


Fig. 1. Motives for choosing a nonpublic academic university by students and graduates (Source: developed by the authors)

In subsequent inquiries, the Likert scale was employed to assess the respondents' evaluation of the extent to which particular factors influenced prospective candidates' decisions in selecting a private academic institution. The survey encompassed queries regarding the influence of various aspects: the educational offers, the calibre of research and teaching personnel, the institution's authority to confer doctoral degrees, the quality of instruction, the balance between theoretical and practical coursework, opportunities for scholarly advancement during the academic program, the institution's visual identity, the standard of infrastructure, the opinions of family and friends, and the tuition fees. The presented research results (see Tables 1 and 2) used a 5-point Likert scale, with respondents assessing the degree of influence of individual factors on their decisions. The questionnaire used terms ranging from "very high" to "no influence," and the results were presented in the same way. The distribution of responses is depicted in Table 1.

Table 1. The degree of influence of individual factors on candidates' decisions regarding the choice of a non-public academic university (Source: developed by the authors)

Factors	very high	high	average	little	no influence	sum	mean
educational offer	227	148	0	2	23	400	4,38
authorisation to award doctoral degrees	41	102	24	54	179	400	2,43
quality of scientific and teaching staff	146	176	68	6	4	400	4,13
high education level	146	176	68	6	4	400	4,13
proportions between theoretical and practical classes	116	174	85	16	9	400	3,93
possibility of scientific development during studies	90	162	119	26	3	400	3,77
visual identification of the university	79	187	108	24	2	400	3,79
quality of infrastructure	88	171	121	15	5	400	3,80
opinion of family and friends	102	165	91	33	9	400	3,79
tuition fee amount	207	144	40	7	2	400	4,36

The conducted research also showed that an important opinion-forming factor influencing the decision to choose a given non-public academic university as a place of studying is the opinions of family and friends.

Subsequently, within the cohort of employees, a total of 117 individuals were involved in the study. Initially, utilising probing questions, participants from this group were asked regarding their motivations for pursuing employment in the higher education sector, as well as their rationale for selecting a particular non-public academic institution, alongside the determinants influencing these choices (Fig. 2).

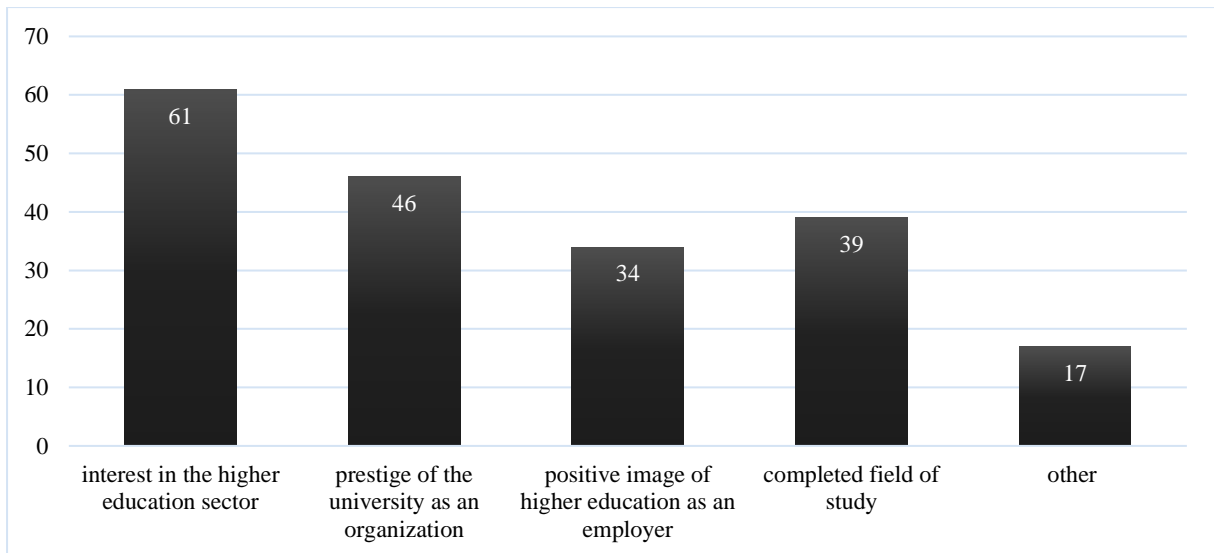


Fig. 2. Motivations of respondents to choose work in the private higher education sector (Source: developed by the authors)

Among the 197 responses gathered from 117 participants, 31% pertain to an interest in this industry, a phenomenon that is naturally associated with individuals seeking employment opportunities within a university setting. The growing popularity of the higher education industry observed in the academic environment is undoubtedly unique in relation to the situation in the Polish education industry as a whole, where a trend of decreasing interest in working in this sector is observed. Another important element for respondents is the importance of the prestige of a university as an organisation, as many as 23% indicated this aspect. This corresponds not only to the interest in the higher education sector (according to the survey, 17% of responses received a positive image of this sector), but also with the growing importance of the university's market image as an economic entity. 20% of the answers were based on the completed field of study, which is probably due to the synergistic influence of current academic lecturers, who often invite outstanding and ambitious students to cooperate during their studies or immediately after graduation. Within the 'other' category, respondents articulated considerations such as: lucrative employment offers, research engagements, an inclination to disseminate knowledge and experiences, a dedication to learning and personal development, as well as individual aptitudes.

In turn, respondents who were asked about the choice of the type of university as an employer indicated that most considered employment in public and private universities (81%). This presents the non-public part of the higher education sector as a competitive participant in the labour market.

The decision of the respondents to accept the job offer was supported by arguments such as the general image of the university on the market, attention to the quality of education, friendly atmosphere, development opportunities, the right to award doctoral degrees, and the image of the university as an employer. This confirms previous conclusions based on the opinions of students and graduates, related to the role of a strong personal brand of employees as brand ambassadors is of considerable importance. At the same time, the willingness to make professional commitments to a university that systematically strengthens this brand.

Further reasons for choosing a non-public academic university as an employer, including the above-mentioned friendly atmosphere, but also the possibility of development and the general market image of the university. These characteristics indicate the influence of personal elements, such as the atmosphere or the development of the employee, that determine the individual assessment and subjective feelings of the respondents. They also influence the overall market image of a private university, which has been confirmed by empirical research. Only 22 people mentioned the university's image as an employer in their responses, which represents 6% of the respondents in the employee group. This shows that employer branding activities are only superficially noticed by employees, and only a narrow group pays attention to these issues. The distribution of the responses is presented in Figure 3.

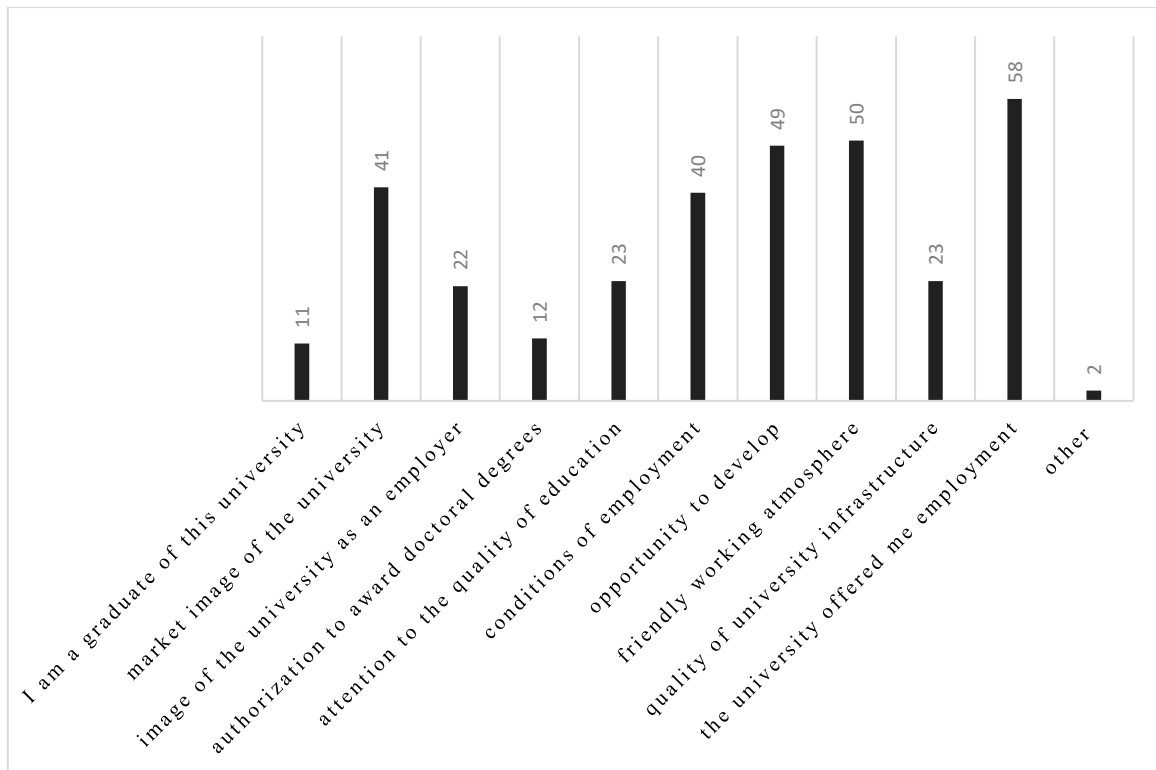


Fig. 3. Motives for choosing a private university as a current employer (Source: developed by the authors)

Survey data reveal the participants' responses regarding the influence of the image of a private academic university on their selection of an employer. A substantial majority reported a significant (52%) and very significant (33%) impact of the university's image on their decision to select it as an employer. This is another confirmation of the importance of the market image of an institution as a recruitment marketing tool. However, 15% of the respondents believed that the university's image had a medium (13%) or a small (2%) influence on this decision. Interestingly, in the question regarding the motive for choosing a non-public academic university as the current employer, only 18% of respondents indicated this aspect as an important factor in the decision-making process.

In analysing responses to an analogous inquiry concerning the impact of the reputation of a private academic institution on its selection by students and alumni, a comparable distribution of responses across individual categories is evident. This indicates that the reputation of a university may constitute a fundamental factor in determining the selection of a specific institution, both as a venue for study and subsequently as a site for career advancement.

Respondents were asked, using a multiple-choice question, which factors have the greatest impact on creating the image of a non-public academic university (Figure 4).

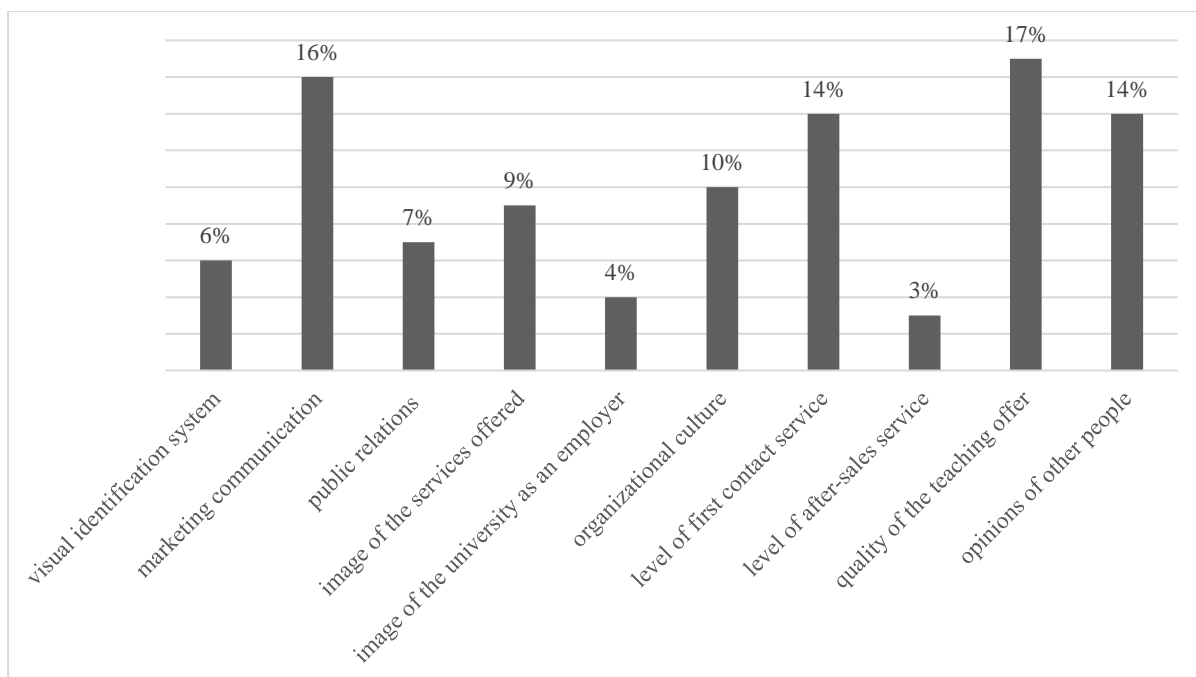


Fig. 4. Factors influencing the creation of the image of a private academic university (Source: developed by the authors)

Then, respondents were asked about the use of individual image-shaping tools at their universities. The distribution of responses is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Activities, according to the opinion of the respondents, that shape the image of the private university (Source: developed by the authors)

factors	strongly agree	agree	neither agree nor disagree	disagree	strongly disagree	altogether	mean
uses a visual identification system	104	226	176	8	3	517	3,81
publishes current and reliable information on its website	187	271	29	28	2	517	4,18
runs a fan page on social media	217	147	136	17	0	517	4,09
cares for the high quality of education	150	278	49	37	3	517	4,03
cares for the high quality of teaching staff	163	264	52	33	5	517	4,05
adapts the educational offer to the needs of the labour market	163	268	67	16	3	517	4,10
systematically modernises the infrastructure	102	189	162	52	12	517	3,6

Upon examining the synthesis of responses concerning individual image-cultivating initiatives implemented by the universities at which respondents either work or study, it can be observed that a significant majority (64%) of the respondents perceive the utilisation of a visual identification system by universities, which implies the manifestation of a visual depiction of the university's brand in the perception of the audience. At the same time, 34% of the respondents have no knowledge about this

topic, and 2% of the respondents indicated that their universities probably do not use a visual identification system. The distribution of answers for this activity is surprising because the visual identification system is used in each of the surveyed non-public academic universities, so it should be assumed that these universities do not properly communicate the visualisation of their brand.

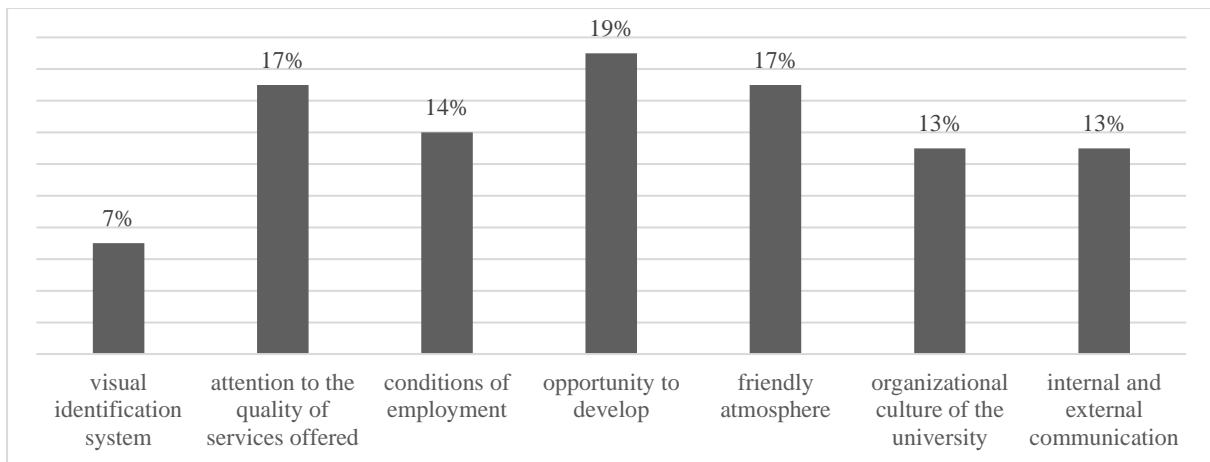


Fig. 5. Factors influencing the employer brand of private academic universities (Source: developed by the authors)

Findings, Conclusions and Limitations of the Study

The obtained results confirmed that organisational image is an important tool in the strategic management of private academic institutions and actively contributes to shaping the competitive position of a university in the Polish market on many levels (economic, social, and international). Therefore, it can be concluded that the assumption that a university's image significantly influences both the interest of potential students in studying at a given institution and the interest of potential candidates in finding employment at a given institution was substantiated. It was also confirmed that the internal and external image of a private academic institution synergistically influence its perception as a good employer and constitute a key competitive tool in the higher education sector. It was only partially confirmed that the most influential factor in shaping the brand image of a private academic institution as an employer is employment conditions, with other factors having much less significance. While this factor was indeed indicated as the most important among employees (almost 70% of responses), among students and graduates it was only ranked fifth, right behind development opportunities, a friendly atmosphere, attention to the quality of services offered, and internal and external communication.

In conclusion, several noticeable points pertaining to the topic of employer branding of universities might be observed. Firstly, it is observable that when employees are queried regarding their motivations for selecting a university as their current employer, the responses most commonly provided pertain to employment conditions and opportunities for professional development. Secondly, the respondents pay attention to the factors shaping the external and internal image, emphasising their importance in building the market position in both groups of respondents, which confirms that both employer branding activities and the general market image strengthen each other. In many responses, at various stages of the study, the respondents indicated significant interest in various elements that create the image. Consequently, the respondents' awareness encompasses not solely the external image of the university but extends to an evaluation of the internal image as well. Both perspectives, when considered synergistically, impact the perception of a private university as a market entity. Thirdly, informal communication, or word of mouth, holds considerable significance among employees, particularly in the context of seeking employment and acquiring opinions about an employer.

Both students and employees emphasise the important role of employer branding and brand management tools for the functioning of an educational institution, such as a private university. In the context of administering a private university across different tiers, the significance of specific employer

branding instruments and the comprehensive image strategy can be discerned with varying degrees of importance. Consequently, it is imperative that ongoing research be sustained in the future to facilitate further development within this sector.

It is imperative to underscore the significance of intentionally employing employer branding, which presently constitutes a specialised approach within the higher education sector, including private universities, and remains largely unexplored. The perception of an organisation's market image as an employer represents a highly engaging and intricate area of study. Given the ongoing shifts in the internal and external environment, coupled with alterations in the perception of both organizational brands and the services they render or products they supply, it becomes apparent that even minor modifications can lead to a diverse array of activities and opportunities for effective managerial application.

In conclusion, it is paramount to underscore that the employer's brand image constitutes a fundamental instrument in the competitive landscape faced by non-public HEIs. Respondents assert that universities leverage the opportunities presented by their efforts to cultivate an employer image. This underscores the increasing significance of employer branding as a mechanism that enables non-public universities to sustain a robust market position and compete effectively within the educational sector. Nearly half of the respondents indicated that universities engage in these activities consistently and substantially, yet there remains a need for further enhancement in this area. This finding is substantiated by a plethora of non-committal responses from participants, exemplified by answers such as "I don't know, I have no opinion" when queried about the extent to which opportunities associated with the utilisation of the employer's brand image are incorporated into the university management strategy. Therefore, it is concluded that the activities implemented by non-public universities, as a component of employer branding within the marketing strategy of a particular university, should be overseen by specific individuals or departments.

Taking into account the literature studies and the presented research, an application guideline for non-public universities can be provided, which specifies potential activities, such as:

- continually enhancing the awareness of stakeholders concerning the potential to influence the competitive standing of a private academic institution by managing its brand image,
- developing a thorough employer branding strategy, aligned with the expectations currently represented within the labour market,
- continuous enhancement and refinement of the quality of educational provisions,
- enhancing and cultivating the allegiance of university employees and students through the strategic application of employer branding methodologies, which encompass advancing qualifications, facilitating training and development, promoting internationalisation, fostering relationships with diverse stakeholders, and ensuring appealing employment opportunities.

In conclusion, the research conducted a detailed analysis of various aspects pertaining to both the external and internal market perceptions of private HEIs. Therefore, the topic under consideration serves as a foundation for further comprehensive research, encompassing, for instance, the examination of the viewpoints of graduates and final-semester master's students concerning their motivation to commence a scientific career and further their progress within this professional trajectory, and the manager's function in influencing the perception of the organisation as an employer.

The prevailing market perception of private academic institutions is characterised by their positioning as contemporary, efficiently managed entities that cultivate a range of interdisciplinary interactions with their surroundings. Considering the research findings, it is imperative to acknowledge the expectation for private universities to exhibit social responsibility by actively partaking in the provision of suitable study and work conditions.

As mentioned in the introduction, the research was pioneering in Poland and therefore can only be compared with theoretical concepts and international studies. Regarding the theoretical assumptions, it can be stated that the research generally confirmed the hypotheses formulated by other researchers, with

the exception of the importance of visual identification. This latter factor was not considered significant in the process of choosing a private university, either as a place of study or a place of work. During the preparation and conduct of the research, the literature on "employer branding" in private universities was unsatisfactory. For the years 2011-2021, Google Scholar returned only 248 results for the query "employer branding" + "private university." These are mostly single case studies. A valuable theoretical contribution was Kidrakarn's doctoral thesis (2014), in which the author pointed to the importance of websites and university rankings in the recruitment and retention process. The authors' research confirmed the importance of websites, while in the Polish context, rankings proved irrelevant. The research also confirmed the thesis formulated in the context of Indian universities (Yameen, et al. 2021), that gender is not a significant factor in employer branding in HEIs.

Research also indicated that it would be advisable to use numerical terms in the scales used (e.g., instead of "very high," use a 0-100 scale, where "very high" would be interpreted as a range of 80-100). Such a change would allow for more accurate analyses but would require the use of comparable scales across studies.

To sum up, an interesting direction of research would be the analysis of the reputation of HEI in the context of branding and market competition, also in international comparisons (Hargitai & Grósz, 2024). The context for such research is created by the internationalization of HEI (Buckner, 2019).

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Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing

During the preparation of this work the author(s) have not used any type of generative AI or AI-assisted technologies.

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