

## Perception of Employer Branding in Social Media – Empirical Study and Implications

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### Abstract

**Aim:** This study examined how often Wrocław university students checked an employer's online presence before applying, how negative evaluations shaped their intentions, and which social-media activities they considered most attractive (April – June 2021). It responds to intensifying labour-market competition and the need for early, effective communication with potential employees.

**Methodology:** A diagnostic survey of purposively selected Bachelor's and Master's students recruited via social platforms, complemented by a literature review on employer branding as both a theoretical concept and an empirical phenomenon.

**Results:** Most respondents reviewed a company's online activity prior to applying, and negative reviews strongly discouraged applications. The analysis identified the employer-branding activities perceived as most effective for young jobseekers; notably, humorous content attracted high interest, underscoring the value of informal communication in building employer–candidate relationships.

**Implications and recommendations:** The findings can help organisations align employer-branding strategies with the expectations of students in Wrocław and increase recruitment efficiency. Investing early in internships and initiatives that support professional development is advised, along with attentive, transparent online communication.

**Originality/value:** By focusing on individuals just entering the labour market, the paper offers a fresh perspective on effective employer branding amid demographic decline and provides practical insights for human resource management.

**Keywords:** employer branding, brand management, employer image, social media

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## 1. Introduction

The dynamic development of the labour market and increasing competition among employers in talent acquisition make employer branding a crucial element of strategic human resources management (Wilden et al., 2010). The concept of *employer branding*, introduced by Ambler and Barrow (1996), initially focused on recruitment activities but has since evolved into a comprehensive approach integrating marketing, human resource management, and organisational communication. Contemporary employer branding and corporate reputation strategies include both internal actions aimed at retaining and engaging current employees and external communication intended to attract new talent (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Employers have come to recognise the advantages of utilising social media platforms to reach a wider pool of potential candidates, often at a lower cost compared to traditional recruitment methods (Wazed & Ng, 2015).

Employer branding activities have undergone significant alterations and evolutions, as emerging evidence highlights three post-2020 inflections. First, AI-curated job ads generate a 31 % lift in click-throughs, signalling an algorithmic turn in employer branding (Universum, 2025). Second, corporate-influencer posts outperform identical third-party messages on authenticity and application intent among European graduates (Durst & Klopff, 2024). Third, qualitative work shows that nearly one-half of Gen Z's internship leads now originate on TikTok, a platform absent from pre-pandemic models (Heimann, 2024). These shifts coexist with a hybrid-first mindset: HR-Dive's 2025 panel finds that fewer than half of firms embed flexibility in talent strategy, despite Gallup's evidence that 62% of young professionals would forgo a 5% pay premium to retain it (Golden, 2025). Responding to this call, a 2024 systematic review of Generation Z's engagement with employer branding synthesised 81 studies from five continents, yet did not include a single Polish sample and reported that digital humour as a branding tactic had been measured only twice, both outside Europe (Fu et al., 2024). Finally, the most recent article involving Polish undergraduates – a comparative survey of business students in Norway and Poland – considered general career preferences (public versus private sector) and treated employer branding only tangentially, without analysing organisations' social-media content (Holum et al., 2024). Collectively, these sources indicate that while global interest in employer branding for Generation Z is accelerating, empirical coverage remains sparse in Poland and, more broadly, in the CEE region, and where Polish students do appear, the focus lies on macro career choices rather than on how branding messages shape employer perceptions. Consequently, empirical knowledge about Polish students' appraisal of employer branding on social media remains absent, along with today's graduate expectations. Despite the growing interest among researchers and business professionals in employer branding in social media, most studies focus on the general candidate's perspective. However, an identified research gap regarding the expectations and behaviour of Polish students – a group that will soon enter the labour market and for whom employer branding may play a key role in selecting an employer. There are limited studies on how students perceive employer branding strategies, which communication elements are most attractive to them, and how an organisation's activity on social media influences their recruitment decisions.

Wrocław hosts over 110,000 tertiary students, and the surrounding region of Lower Silesia exemplifies the highest density of students per 10,000 population. In addition, this region also demonstrates the highest IT student density in the country (16.6%) (GUS, 2024). The city hosts 30 universities and numerous start-up and entrepreneurial technological sites, accelerating innovation and increasing the attractiveness of the local job market. An IT-oriented vibrant business environment and hiring opportunities have made Wrocław an innovative hub, recognised and appreciated in Poland, and in the international context it is often referred to as the *Polish Silicon Valley* (Kuźmińska-Haberla, 2024). Guided by best practice in research objective specification (Bjerke & Renger, 2017), the study, carried out in the period between 15 April and 30 June 2021, adopted the following *SMART* objective and aims to determine: (1) the proportion of Wrocław-based university students who consult an employer's social-media presence before submitting a job application, (2) the extent to which a negative mean employer rating ( $\leq 2.5/5$ ) reduces their stated intention to apply, and (3) the three employer branding

activities on social media that obtain the highest mean attractiveness score ( $\geq 4.5/7$ ) from this group in order to develop evidence-based recommendations for firms recruiting graduates in 2025. By focusing on a demographic group just entering the labour market, this study provides a new perspective on effective employer branding strategies – an issue of growing relevance to businesses competing for skilled new entrants at a time of demographic decline. Therefore the author examined which employer branding activities were the most influential and which aspects of communication influenced the perception of a company's attractiveness, and addressed the following research questions:

- *Which social media channels do students most frequently use to obtain information about potential employers?*
- *Which employer branding activities on social media are considered the most attractive and effective by students?*
- *How does an organisation's activity and reputation on social media influence students' decisions regarding job applications?*
- *Which elements of online communication are crucial in shaping a positive employer image among students?*

The first section of the article presents a literature review, discussing key concepts of employer branding and the role of social media in employer brand-building strategies. It also introduces theoretical models of employer branding, including those by Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) and Martin (2007). The second section describes the research methods, which are based on a diagnostic survey, with a particular focus on sample selection and data analysis tools. The third section presents and interprets the results, including analysing students' use of social media for employer branding and their evaluation of different branding strategies. The final section discusses the results, relates them to previous studies. Thus the study provides practical implications for organisations and conclusions, along with recommendations for future research.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Employer Branding – Theoretical Background

The first definition of employer branding was introduced in 1996 by Ambler and Barrow, pioneers of the concept of employer brand development. It originates from the concept of relationship marketing, where it existed in an implicit form even before its formal introduction. Ambler and Barrow defined employer branding as a combination of functional, economic, and psychological benefits associated with employment and identification with an organisation. As well as defining the concept, Ambler and Barrow made several significant observations that continue to be explored nowadays. They highlighted the similarities between human resources (HR) and product marketing, suggesting that the two fields should complement each other, and also emphasised the need for a shift in organisational perspective – from profit-orientation to employee-orientation, arguing that employees should be seen as internal customers. Hence, employer branding can be both external as well as internal-facing, with goals ranging from engagement and retention (Ozcelik, 2015) to talent acquisition and recruitment through creation of an attractive employer brand (Wilden et al., 2010).

The evolution of employer branding has been influenced by labour market changes, particularly at the turn of the 21st century. Recognising employees as the most valuable asset of a company led to the development of new recruitment and retention methods (Gilani & Cunningham, 2017), which continue to adapt to evolving market conditions (Singh, 2019). A key moment in employer branding research was the 1998 publication of the article "The War for Talent" in McKinsey Quarterly. The study, based on 77 successful American companies, sought to explain why top industry experts preferred working for certain organisations (Chambers et al., 1998). One of the key findings was that, beyond salary

considerations, a strong and well-defined employee value proposition (EVP) played a crucial role in attracting top talent. As corporate brands are beginning to be considered a valuable resource (Balmer & Gray, 2003), employer branding activities gain significance. Further studies by Moroko and Uncles aimed to identify the key characteristics of strong employer brands, which highlighted three essential qualities of an effective employer brand: (1) "Visibility and recognition" (the employer brand must be well-known); (2) "Relevance and responsiveness" (the brand should align with current industry challenges); (3) "Differentiation from competitors" (the employer brand should stand out in the labour market) (Moroko & Uncles, 2008).

## 2.2. Selected Employer Branding Models

Over recent decades, the concept of employer branding has evolved significantly, incorporating insights from sociology, marketing, economics, management and business studies. Various theoretical models have been developed to adapt the concept to changing realities.

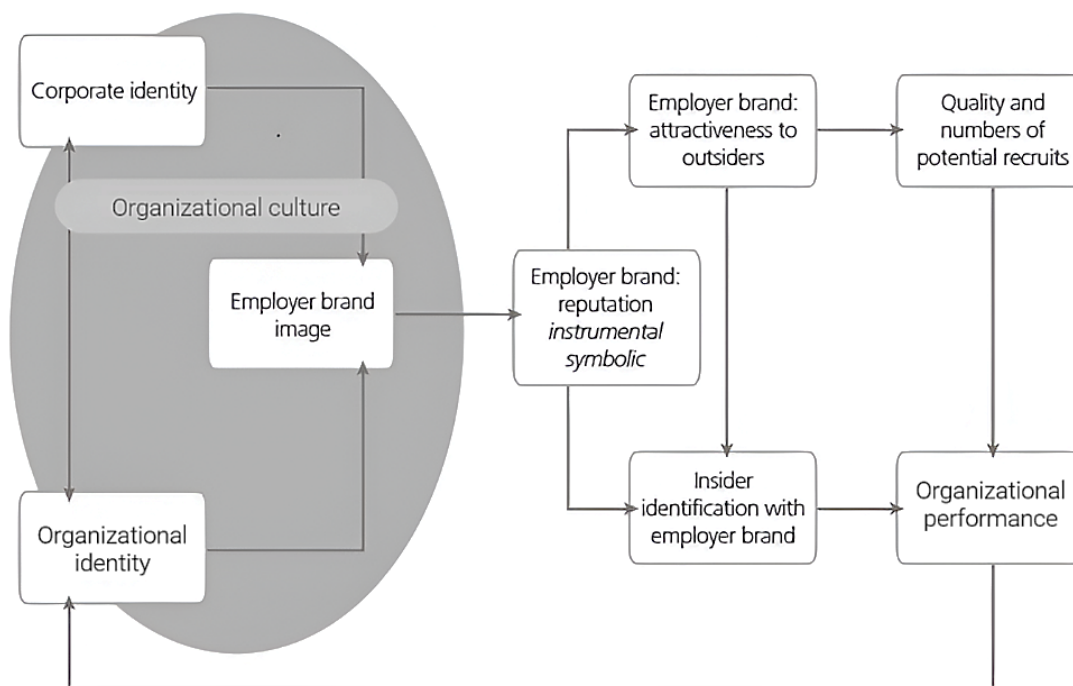


Fig. 1. Martin's model of employer branding

Source: (Martin, 2007).

One of the most influential models was proposed by Martin (2007). At the time of its publication, the author noted the lack of conceptual clarity in employer branding research and sought to address this issue through a structured theoretical framework. Martin's model aimed to visually represent employer branding strategies while organising the field's fragmented terminology. Martin suggested that the essence of employer branding lies in two fundamental activities: (1) attracting the attention and interest of talented individuals and (2) ensuring that both new and existing employees feel connected to the organisation and identify with its mission and values.

Another well-recognised model is the 2004 framework by Backhaus and Tikoo, which distinguishes between brand associations and employee loyalty. According to their model, brand associations refer to how an organisation's image is perceived, encompassing both explicit statements and implicit emotions tied to the employer, while employee loyalty, derived from consumer loyalty theory, is reflected in trust, commitment, and long-term engagement with the company. Backhaus and Tikoo emphasise that effective employer branding must integrate external image management with internal organisational culture, ensuring consistency between public perception and internal employee experience.

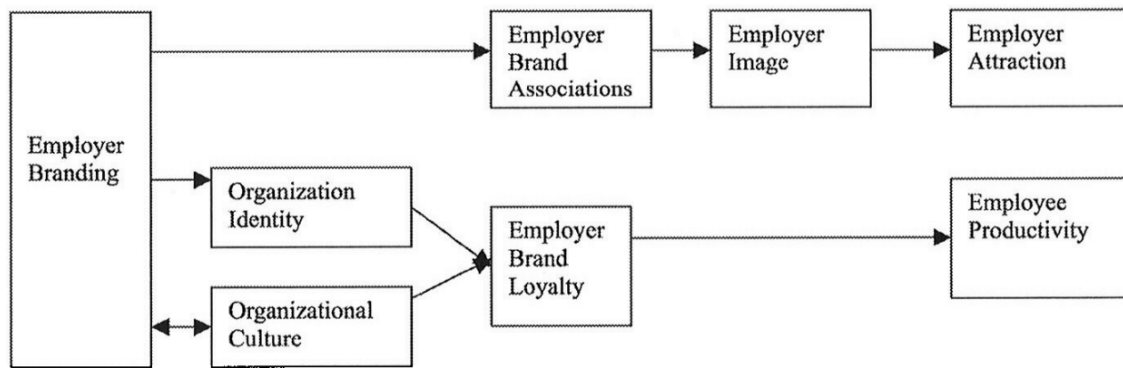


Fig. 2. Employer branding model by Backhaus and Tikoo

Source: (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004).

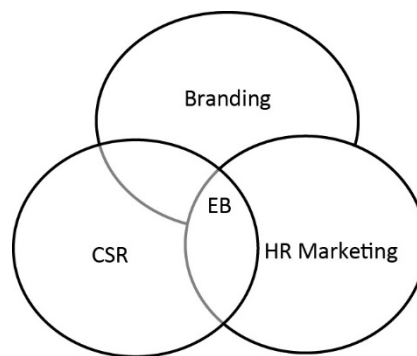


Fig. 3. Employer branding model by Aggerholm, Andersen and Thomsen

Source: (Aggerholm et al., 2011).

The third model, introduced in 2011 by Aggerholm, Andersen, and Thomsen, takes a sustainability-oriented approach to employer branding, and incorporates corporate social responsibility (CSR) and corporate business responsibility (CBR) into employer brand management. This framework suggests that a sustainable employer brand must balance the interests of all stakeholders, not just shareholders, highlighting the holistic integration of employer branding with broader corporate values.

Over time, employer branding models in academic literature have evolved to address conceptual clarity, integrate internal and external perspectives, and incorporate sustainability principles. Martin's (2007) model sought to structure the fragmented terminology in the field. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) highlighted the need for alignment between an organization's external image and internal culture. Later, Aggerholm, Andersen, and Thomsen (2011) introduced a sustainability-oriented model, integrating CSR and CBR into employer branding, reflecting a shift toward a stakeholder-driven approach.

### 2.3. Social Media and the Employer Brand

In navigating the landscape of talent acquisition and retention, organisations have recognised the immense potential of social media as a transformative tool for employer branding (Kissel & Buttgen, 2015). Social media platforms have become a crucial avenue for organisations to showcase their unique value proposition, building a strong and compelling employer brand that resonates with prospective and current employees (Sivertzen et al., 2013).

The impact of social media on employer branding cannot be overstated. Organisations can leverage these dynamic platforms to effectively communicate their corporate culture, values, and work environment, attracting talented individuals who align with the company's ethos. (Auriemma et al.,

2018). Moreover, social media enables a more interactive and transparent engagement with the target audience, allowing organisations to build authentic connections and cultivate a positive perception as a desirable workplace (Dreher, 2014).

The strategic integration of social media into human resource management practices has become increasingly prevalent (Hosain, 2023). Platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn have emerged as preferred channels for hiring professionals, offering valuable insights into candidate behaviour and job-related information. Furthermore, a strong corporate brand presence on social media can positively influence the efficiency of the talent attraction and retention process, as it strengthens the organisation's competitive advantage and enhances its appeal as a sought-after employer (Szwajlik, 2018). Companies can also build brand awareness among university students, who might become potential candidates.

A growing stream of post-2018 research has refined the understanding of how different audiences interpret employer cues online, offering a direct backdrop for this study's focus on Wrocław university students. Tewari (2018) compared Indian managers, employees and student job-seekers and showed that each group favoured distinct platforms and cues: managers concentrated on LinkedIn and weigh functional and values-based signals, employees preferred Facebook and emphasised economic benefits, while students combined Facebook consumption with heightened sensitivity to both functional and economic dimensions. Tewari stressed that brand authenticity depends on closing the gap between internal culture and external narrative, a principle that underpins this paper's examination of students' reactions to negative reviews versus humorous, informal posts. Extending the multi-stakeholder lens, Ambatkar (2021) also contrasted managers, employees, and students. Although daily social-media use was ubiquitous, channel reach and audience motives diverged: managers preferred LinkedIn and blogging portals, employees concentrated on Facebook, and students split attention between Facebook and networking sites. Most students – but far fewer managers – attributed employer awareness chiefly to social media, prompting the recommendation that organisations maintain high-traffic visibility, respond quickly to feedback, and mobilise employees as online ambassadors. These findings aligned with the current research questions on the relative appeal of specific employer branding activities and channels among Polish students. It is also concurrent with the research by Wawer (2022), which revealed that the overall assessment of the internship affects their willingness to work at the given company and to recommend the company to others. Recent Polish evidence confirms that work-model flexibility itself now functions as an employer branding cue: Gryko (2024) showed that, despite 49% of employees favouring hybrid arrangements by 2024, only 25% of *Pracuj.pl* vacancies highlighted such flexibility, and the correlation between candidate demand and flexible-work supply was negative and non-significant. These findings emphasise the need to study remote and hybrid options alongside social-media tactics when assessing what makes an employer attractive to Polish Generation Z. Despite those exemplary and informative studies, a Polish context is lacking in scientific literature. A systematic review of 81 Generation-Z studies similarly reported “no Polish data points” and noted that digital-humour effects have been tested only in Asia and North America (Fu et al., 2024). Even when Polish students appear in cross-country work – for example, Holum et al. (2024) compared Norway and Poland – the focus was on public-versus-private career motives, and not on how organisations' social-media activity shapes application intent. Recent Polish research on employer branding (Stachowska & Wontora, 2021) relied on traditional media channels and did not fully analyse humour or online-review reputational valence. Collectively, these observations confirm a clear empirical gap regarding how Polish university students interpret social-media employer branding, thereby underscoring the importance of the presented study.

Focusing solely on prospective applicants, (Bharadwaj, 2024) surveyed 385 Indian management students and employed a dual-mediation model to show that combined social-media exposure and employee reviews translate brand attributes into application intent. Only corporate social responsibility, a healthy work atmosphere, and development opportunities exerted direct influence;

compensation and work-life balance were non-significant. Once the digital mediators were included, direct effects weakened, indicating that candidates first seek confirmation of employer claims through peer-generated content before deciding to apply. This finding lends empirical support to this author's interest in how negative reviews deter Polish students despite the presence of attractive branding content. While most extant research privileges the external audience, Yoganathan, Osburg and Bartikowski (2021) re-centred attention on employees themselves. They demonstrate that higher social-media competence cultivates bonding and bridging online social capital, which in turn raises brand-citizenship behaviour (BCB) and reduces psychological-contract violation. As competence influences brand citizenship only through peer-network formation, the study highlighted the gatekeeping role of employee-to-employee ties in digital advocacy. Although it stops short of measuring prospective applicants' perceptions, it reinforces the importance of authentic, employee-generated content – one of the activity types which this survey asked Wrocław students to evaluate. Regional evidence remains sparse, yet Mičík and Mičudová (2018) offered a rare Central-European perspective – analysing sixty “Top Czech Employers”, they found that 78% provided informative career sites, but only one-third maintained active social-media channels, leaving significant scope for real-time engagement with young talent. Their cluster analysis showed that firms integrating both channels ranked highest in Millennial appeal, echoing this author's assumption that multichannel presence may enhance employer attractiveness among digitally-native Polish students.

Robertson et al. (2019) moved beyond company-authored content by analysing 6,300 *Glassdoor* posts about sixty B2B employers. Five-star employee reviews correlated with perceptions of competence, excitement, sincerity and sophistication, whereas one-star reviews evoked ruggedness – effects stronger than those of overall social-media reach. The authors argued that organisations must actively curate employee narratives on review platforms, a conclusion directly relevant to the third research question on how negative ratings shape application intentions. Recent research confirms that Polish and CEE students broadly mirror global Gen-Z priorities – skills development, transparent CSR, and flexible work models – yet display sharper sensitivity to internship quality and hybrid-work guarantees. The mixed-methods audit of sixty “Top Czech Employers” found that only one-third maintained active social-media channels, signalling an under-exploited branding vehicle in the region (Mičík & Mičudová, 2018). Extending this line, Holum et al. (2024) showed that Polish business students rated *employer reputation* and *growth opportunities* significantly higher than their Norwegian peers when choosing between public and private-sector careers. Employer-side evidence echoed this emphasis: a 2024 study of Polish enterprises implementing human-capital-management (HCM) systems reported that firms cite *talent attraction* and *remote-work orchestration* as the chief drivers of system adoption (Zielińska et al., 2024). Finally, Siem et al. (2025) applied a bibliometric-coupling analysis of the Scopus database (using VOSviewer) to map how the employer-attractiveness field has evolved and to highlight under-researched areas. Their clustering revealed four dominant themes: (1) indicators that constitute employer attractiveness, (2) the use of attractiveness in communication strategies aimed at potential employees, (3) organisational attractiveness within the public sector, and (4) the interplay between internal communication and employer branding. The authors concluded that, compared with other HR aspects, employer-attractiveness research remained relatively fragmented and recommended that future research fills topical and regional gaps, an observation directly supporting this study's Polish focus.

By integrating these insights, the revised literature review not only contextualises the theoretical models presented earlier but also anchors the study's methods and research questions in demonstrable empirical gaps, namely limited Central-European data, scant attention to student humour preferences, and under-exploration of review-site effects. Therefore, the diagnostic survey of Wrocław students serves as a timely regional replication that tests whether the global patterns identified above hold in the Polish context, and clarifies which social-media activities most effectively enhance employer appeal among new labour-market entrants.

### 3. Methodology

To achieve research objectives a quantitative research approach was selected. The study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional diagnostic-survey design administered online via Google Forms. The research population comprised students from Wrocław universities. According to data from the 2019/2020 academic year, there were 110,123 students enrolled at Wrocław institutions of higher education. To ensure a diverse sample, students were recruited through dedicated online student groups on social media platforms. Given the exploratory aim of finding students who actively engage with employers on social media, a random draw from the entire student roll was not feasible. Instead, purposive sampling via closed Facebook groups ensured access to individuals with direct experience of social-media employer branding, which is the phenomenon under investigation. The questionnaire was drafted in Polish, adapting item wordings from Mičík and Mičudová (2018) and Bharadwaj (2024), and then subjected to a single validation stage. It was reviewed item-by-item by the thesis supervisor – who confirmed content relevance, clarity, and alignment with the study's objectives. Minor wording refinements (e.g. substituting “corporate channels” with “firm-run social-media profiles”) were made based on this expert feedback. As most constructs were captured with single items to minimise respondent burden, internal-consistency coefficients were not applicable, instead face and content validity were assured through this expert evaluation process.

The above included closed groups on Facebook specifically for students of Wrocław universities, ensuring that the sample represented individuals who engage in social media-based employer branding activities. Data were collected between 15 April and 30 June 2021 via an online questionnaire distributed to closed student groups on social media (N = 105). The questionnaire consisted of three sections:

- Qualifying question – a closed-ended question verifying whether the respondent met the study's inclusion criteria.
- Demographic section – five closed-ended questions addressing the respondent's gender, academic level, study profile, study mode, and employment status.
- Main research section – six substantive questions related to the study's objectives. This section included varied question formats, such as: semi-open multiple-choice questions, closed-ended alternative questions, and Likert scale questions (seven-point scale).

Verification of student status, which determined eligibility to proceed to the second questionnaire (inclusion criterion), was confirmed in 96.2% of cases, resulting in a final sample of 101 respondents (Appendix 1), where 64 (63.4%) were women, while 37 (36.6%) were men (Appendix 2). The majority of respondents were Master's students (51.5%), followed by Bachelor's students (39.6%). A smaller number was enrolled in long-cycle Master's programmes (7.9%), while one respondent (1%) was a PhD student (Appendix 3). Most participants studied in a full-time mode (55.5%), with fewer enrolled in part-time programmes (43.5%). None of the respondents were evening class students (Appendix 4). Among the respondents, the largest groups were students of technical fields (38.6%), humanities (26.7%), and law and social sciences (18.8%) (Appendix 5). Aside from their studies, the majority of respondents were professionally active, with 68.3% engaged in paid employment (Appendix 6). Based on these findings, the typical respondent can be characterised as a professionally active woman pursuing a second-cycle (Master's) degree in a STEM or technical field in a full-time study mode.

All the responses were exported to Microsoft Excel 365, screened for completeness, and coded. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, medians) addressed each research question at a univariate level. To examine relationships between variables, four procedures were pre-registered: (i) Pearson or likelihood-ratio  $\chi^2$  tests for associations between categorical variables (e.g. study level  $\times$  LinkedIn use); (ii) Mann-Whitney U or Kruskal-Wallis H tests for Likert-type ratings across independent groups; (iii) Spearman rank correlations for ties between ordinal variables; (iv) binary logistic regression to model the probability of submitting an application as a function of perceived employer-image importance



while controlling for gender and study level. A G\*Power 3.1 calculation indicated that 96 cases were required to detect a medium effect ( $w = .30$ ) with  $\alpha = .05$  and power = .80; the achieved sample of 101 therefore provided adequate statistical sensitivity. Since the main research section comprised single-item measures adapted from prior studies (e.g. Bharadwaj, 2024; Mičik & Mičudová, 2018), internal-consistency coefficients were not applicable. Content validity was established through expert review by one academic and one employer branding practitioner, leading to minor wording adjustments before field deployment. In line with the University of Wrocław's research ethics guidelines for studies involving anonymous adult surveys, the project was classified as 'minimal risk' and therefore did not require formal committee review. Participation was entirely voluntary, and the respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, data-handling procedures and their right to withdraw at any time before providing consent via the first survey screen.

## 4. Results

The survey comprised 101 valid questionnaires, with women representing 63% of the sample, and Master's students constituting the largest study-level subgroup (52%). STEM-oriented majors dominated (39%), while 68% of all respondents combined study with paid work, underlining their immediate relevance to graduate recruitment. The results are presented in the following four thematic blocks that mirror the four research questions.

### 4.1. Which Online Channels Do Students Use to Assess Employers?

Job-search portals led the information hierarchy as 66% of the respondents tracked employer activity on platforms such as *Pracuj.pl*, *NoFluffJobs* or *RocketJobs* (Table 1). Facebook followed closely (64%), ahead of LinkedIn (51%). Instagram (28%) and Twitter (4%) were minority sources, whilst corporate career pages and university news sites were cited only once each. A Pearson chi-square test examined whether LinkedIn adoption varies by study level. The difference approached conventional significance,  $\chi^2(3, N = 101) = 6.59, p = 0.086$ : 61% of Master's students consulted LinkedIn versus 41% of Bachelor's students. Gender had no influence on platform choice (all  $\chi^2$  tests,  $p > 0.10$ ). This can be interpreted that the platform split confirms earlier cross-country evidence (Ambatkar, 2021) that more advanced students migrate toward professional networks, while Facebook retains mass reach.

Table 1. Answers to the question: On what online channels do you observe the activities of current or potential employers?

On what online channels do you observe the activities of current or potential employers?	Number of answers	Percentage of responders
Job portals	67	66.3%
Facebook	65	64.4%
LinkedIn	52	51.5%
Instagram	28	27.7%
Twitter	4	3.9%
University news page	1	0.9%
Employers' websites	1	0.9%
None of the above	4	3.9%
Total	226	223.7%

Source: own elaboration.

## 4.2. Which Social-media Activities Are Most Attractive?

Students evaluated nine common employer branding formats (multiple responses) where four emerge as those preferred (see Table 2).

Table 2. Answers to the question: What social media activities of companies do you find most interesting?

What social media activities of companies do you find most interesting?	Number of answers	Percentage of responders
Training programmes for students	56	55.4%
Job fairs and open days	44	43.6%
Memes, humorous content	42	41.6%
Webinars	41	40.6%
Questions and answers sessions with recruiters	31	30.7%
Sharing employee-generated content	30	29.7%
Ambassador programmes, introducing employee profiles	27	26.7%
Communicating charitable activities	23	22.8%
Occasional takeover and running of social media channels by an employee	18	17.6%
N/A	3	2.9%
Total	315	311%

Source: own elaboration.

Middle-tier options included Q&A sessions with recruiters (31 %), employee-generated content (30%), and ambassador profiles (27%). Posts about charitable initiatives (23%) and one-day ‘takeovers’ of corporate channels (18%) attracted the least enthusiasm. No significant differences in activity preference appeared across gender, employment status, or broad field of study (all  $\chi^2$  or Kruskal-Wallis tests,  $p > 0.10$ ). In particular, humorous content scored equally well among STEM (41%) and non-STEM students (42%;  $\chi^2 = 0.01$ ,  $p = 0.92$ ). Consistently with Tewari (2018) and the Czech audit by Mičík and Mičudová (2018), students placed the highest value on formats which provide skills or direct access to recruiters, yet humour reliably occupies third place – highlighting an appetite for informal tone alongside functional content.

## 4.3. How Do Negative Online Reviews Influence Application Intentions?

On a seven-point scale (1 = definitely not; 7 = definitely yes), willingness to apply to a poorly-reviewed company showed a left-skewed distribution, i.e. mean = 2.82, SD = 1.34, and 86% of respondents chose  $\leq 4$ , signalling reluctance. A binary logistic regression predicted the likelihood of applying scores  $\geq 5 = 1$  from the perceived importance of a positive employer image (also a 7-point score). The results confirmed a strong negative association:

Predictor	B	SE	Wald	P	Odds ratio
Positive-image importance	-0.73	0.25	8.11	<b>0.004</b>	0.48

Every one-unit rise in the importance attached to reputation roughly halved the odds of applying to a negatively reviewed company. A non-parametric Spearman test corroborated the pattern ( $\rho = -0.36$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The deterrent effect of unfavourable reviews was in line with those in Bharadwaj (2024) dual-mediation model and those in the study by Robertson et al. (2019) finding that employee narratives on review sites shape employer personality more forcefully than corporate social-media reach.

Table 3. Answers to the question: Do you check the company's social media and/or website before applying to a particular company?

Do you check the company's social media and/or website before applying to a particular company?	Number of answers	Percentage of answers
Yes	90	89.1%
No	11	10.9%
Total	101	100%

Source: own elaboration.

The next question in this section was a closed-ended alternative one, whose objective was to examine the respondents' behaviour in the job search and application process, specifically whether they verified a potential employer's online presence before applying. The majority (89.1%) reported that they checked the company's social media profiles and/or website before submitting an application, whereas others declared that they do not engage in this verification process.

#### 4.4. Does a Preference for Humorous Content Soften the Review Penalty?

Forty-two students (42%) include “memes/funny posts” among their top three activities. A point-biserial correlation between humour preference (0/1) and willingness to apply to a poorly-reviewed firm was modest and non-significant ( $r = 0.16$ ,  $p = 0.114$ ). Thus, enjoying playful content did not override the reputational filter imposed by negative peer reviews. It can be stated that humour amplifies engagement (see Durst & Klopff 2024), but does not repair trust once credibility is damaged – supporting the authenticity principle outlined in (Yoganathan et al., 2021).

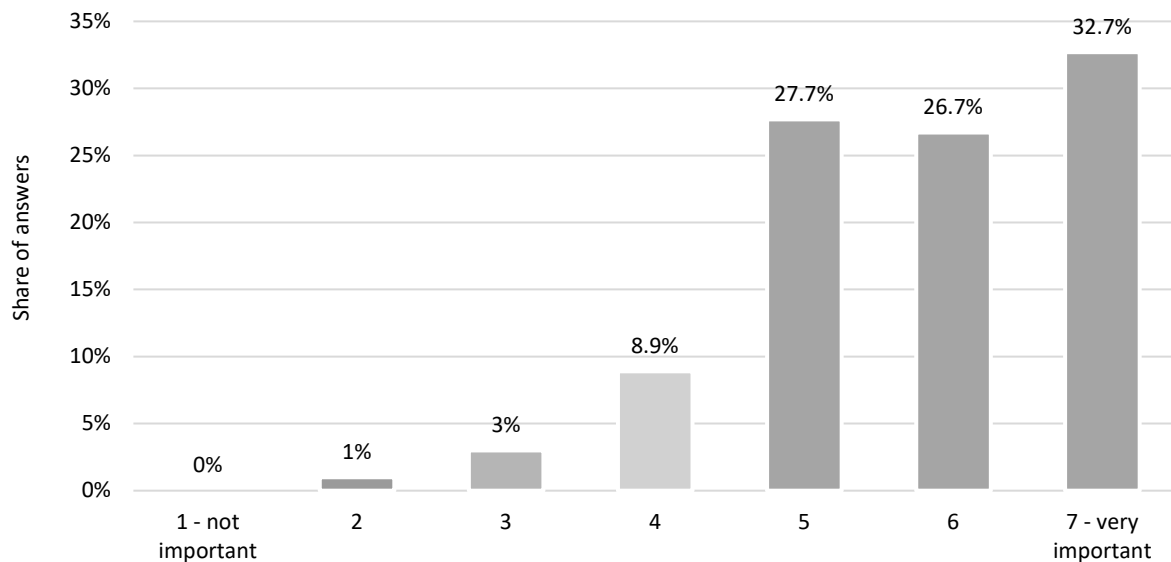


Fig. 4. Answers to the question: How important is a positive image of the company you work for?

Source: own elaboration.

To assess the importance of a positive company image from the respondents' perspective, a seven-point Likert scale was used, where 1 indicated that the company's image is not important at all, and 7 signified that it is very important. Only 1% considered a positive employer image “unimportant”, whilst 3% rated it as “rather unimportant” and 8.9% were neutral on the matter. The majority, however, regarded a positive public perception of their workplace as important, selecting the following responses: “rather important” (27.7%), “important” (26.7%), and “very important” (32.7%).

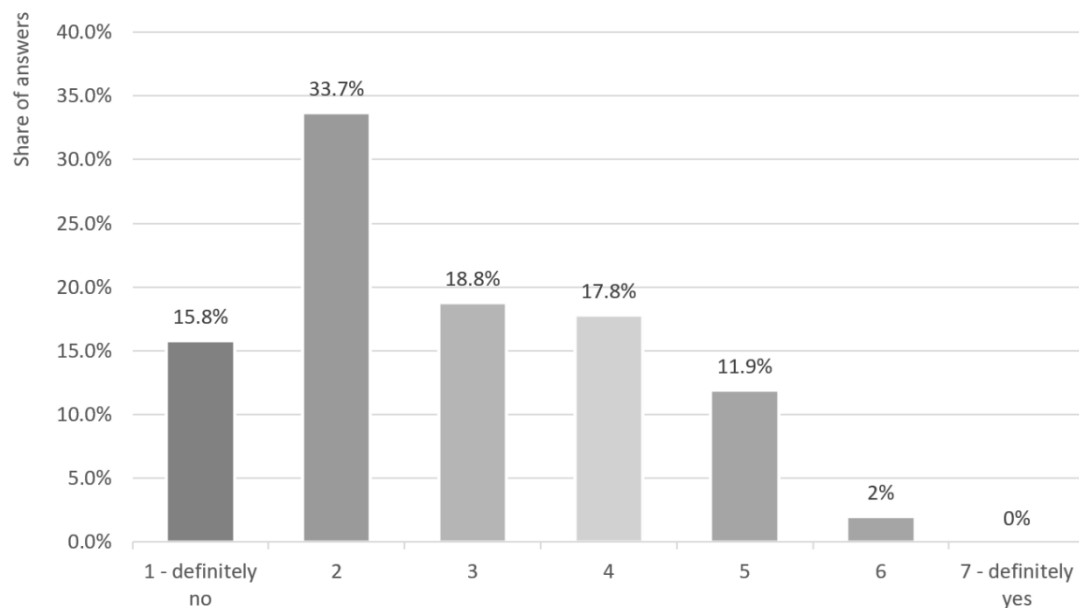


Fig. 5. Answers to the question: Would you apply to a company that has negative online reviews?

Source: own elaboration.

The question aimed to assess respondents' willingness to apply to a company with negative online reviews on dedicated platforms. The results indicate a general reluctance to do so. A significant proportion, i.e. 15.8%, stated that they are *definitely not* willing to apply to a negatively rated company, while 33.7% selected *no* and 18.8% chose *rather not*. Additionally, 17.8% of the respondents were neutral on the matter. Only 13.9% expressed some level of willingness to apply, with 11.9% selecting *rather yes* and 2% choosing *yes*. Notably, none of the respondents indicated that they would *definitely* apply to such a company. These findings suggest that a negative online reputation can significantly deter potential job applicants.

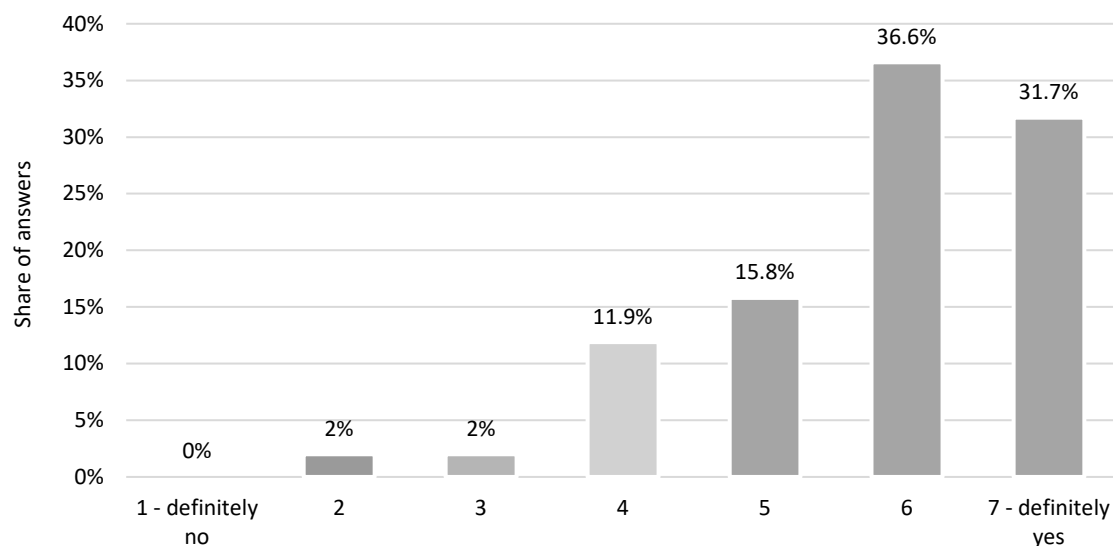


Fig. 6. Answers to the question: Do you think employers' online activities can improve the image of the company?

Source: own elaboration.

The final Likert scale question examined the extent to which the respondents believed that an employer's online activity can contribute to an overall improvement in its image. The majority indicated a strong belief in this relationship, with 31.7% selecting *definitely yes* and 36.6% choosing

yes. Additionally, 15.8% responded with *rather yes*, while 11.9% remained neutral on the issue. Only a small percentage expressed scepticism, with 2% selecting *rather no* or *no*. These findings support the notion that employer activity in the digital space was widely perceived as having a positive impact on corporate image.

It can be summed up that two-thirds of students consulted job portals, half of them using LinkedIn, with a higher uptake among Master's students. Reputational valence exerted a statistically robust, negative influence on application intent (odds ratio = 0.48). Training programmes, virtual job fairs, and humorous content achieved the highest salience ( $\geq 41\%$  selection each). Collectively, the results indicate that Polish students mirror global Gen-Z patterns in their insistence on authenticity and skill development, yet they remain highly reputation-sensitive – underlining the strategic imperative for companies to integrate substantive learning opportunities with vigilant online-review management when addressing the Wrocław talent pool.

## 5. Discussion

The survey strengthens the statement that employer branding on social media influences how students and young professionals perceive organisations. Most of the respondents checked a company's online presence, both on social media and official websites, before applying. The data showed that 89.1% of the respondents reviewed a company's online activity before applying, indicating that businesses neglecting their online presence may struggle to attract talent. The result was consistent with a 2014 study which revealed a positive correlation between strong brand image and likelihood to apply among management students in India (Chhabra & Sharma, 2014).

Students' preferences for employer branding formats offer valuable insights for HR and communications managers. The respondents favoured student training programmes (55.4%), virtual job fairs and open days (43.6%), interactive content such as webinars (40.6%), and Q&A sessions with recruiters (30.7%). The great popularity of educational content confirms that the young generation expects employers to provide not only information about job opportunities but also real support in developing professional skills.

An important finding of the survey was the high level of interest in humorous content (41.6%), suggesting the increasing significance of informal communication in fostering relationships between employers and candidates, which aligns with previous research on the role of authenticity in employer branding (Fournier, 1998). Given this, organisations should carefully consider their communication tone and tailor it to audience expectations – humour and a less formal style may serve as effective tools for enhancing employer image, particularly among young professionals entering the job market. This result corresponds with previous research on the impact of humour on the advert and on the advertiser's positive perception (Eisend, 2009).

Another critical issue was the influence of online reputation on students' employer choices. The survey results showed that 67.3% of the respondents would be unwilling to apply to a company with negative online reviews. This finding was consistent with Backhaus and Tikoo's (2004) employer branding model, which stressed that an organisation's image affects not only candidate perceptions but also the long-term loyalty and engagement of current employees. Cable and Turban's study was also consistent with the research findings, although it went beyond examining students (Cable & Turban, 2003). Research on Czech Generation Y also confirmed the importance of positive references and corporation rating (Bejtkovský, 2018). Finally, a study of students in the city of Olsztyn, Poland, found that a positive image of an employer had a significant influence on prospective applicants searching for employment in a given company (Stachowska & Wontora, 2021). Consequently, organisations should implement reputation management strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of negative reviews.

This survey also offered valuable insights into the most frequently used communication channels. The platforms most commonly followed by students to track potential employers' activities were job

portals (66.3%), Facebook (64.4%), and LinkedIn (51.5%), which suggests that companies should tailor their communication strategies to the characteristics of each platform—while LinkedIn is well-suited for building a professional image, Facebook and Instagram can serve as spaces for more engaging and informal employer branding efforts.

This study extended employer branding research in three ways. First, it provided country-specific evidence from Central-Eastern Europe, a region that remains under-represented in the post-2020 literature on employer attractiveness. Second, it tested the combined influence of platform choice, content format, and online-review valence within a single student group, answering repeated calls to explore multivariate relationships rather than isolated descriptors (Soeling et al., 2022). Third, it emphasises humorous content – a tactic widely practised to enhance intentions to share job ads, contradicting the findings of, e.g. Oikarinen and Söderlund (2016) presenting the evidence that it indeed impacts on the intentions to apply for the job.

Regarding platform use and segmentation, LinkedIn's significantly higher uptake among Master's students corroborated global evidence that more job-ready groups gravitate toward professional networks, whereas early-stage students rely on mass-reach channels such as Facebook. This segmentation suggested that employers targeting advanced students in Wrocław should prioritise LinkedIn micro-campaigns, while awareness-building among first-cycle students can remain Facebook-centred. The study also contributes to research on content preferences (skills first, fun a close third). Training programmes, virtual fairs and webinars topped the attractiveness ranking, confirming that Generation Z values instrumental support and direct access to recruiters. The strong showing of humorous posts (42%) was in line with experimental work demonstrating that humour in online job ads boosts initial message attention and positive affect. The absence of differences across gender or study field suggest that humour is a broad-spectrum enhancer rather than a niche cue. Moreover, the study contributed to the discussion about the reputation filters and the boundaries of humour. Consistent with multi-study projects in tourism and retail (Van Vaerenbergh & Arijs, 2025), negative peer reviews sharply suppressed application intent. Logistic modelling showed that every one-point increase in the importance attached to employer image halved the odds of applying, echoing the findings that organisational reputation mediates the link between brand attractiveness and the intention to apply. Contrary to anecdotal practitioner claims, a taste for humorous content did *not* mitigate the review penalty – mirroring brand-forgiveness research that finds humour to buffer transgressions only in limited contexts (Rathee et al., 2022). Together, these results reinforce the argument that authenticity and credibility outweigh stylistic flair – once trust is compromised, playful messaging cannot compensate.

From the theoretical point of view, the study also created some implications. The data support a dual mechanism whereby functional/educational content raises *initial* attractiveness, but online review valence acts as a gatekeeper at the *decision* stage – extending Bharadwaj's two-mediator model beyond the South-Asian contexts. The null interaction between humour preference and review deterrence provided the first student-sample evidence that humour enhances engagement without moderating credibility judgments, adding nuance to humour-in-recruitment theories. By documenting Central-European patterns that converge with – and diverge from – global trends, the study enriches cross-cultural employer branding theory and responds to calls for geographically balanced data sets (Siem et al., 2025).

Lastly, HR and communications managers should (1) match platform strategy to study level (LinkedIn for Master's students, Facebook/Instagram for earlier groups), (2) blend skill-building offers with light-hearted posts to maximise reach and relevance, and (3) monitor and respond to peer reviews promptly, as humour alone cannot neutralise reputational damage. Recent research showed that proactive responses to employee reviews significantly improved perceived helpfulness and brand favourability, especially as negative reviews were considered more helpful and partially buffered by organizational ratings (Morgan & Chapman, 2024).

Taken together, these findings support Backhaus and Tikoo's (2004) dual-image logic by confirming that external reputation (peer reviews) constrains application intent, even when internal value cues are attractive. They extend Bharadwaj's (2024) dual-mediation model by demonstrating the same review-gatekeeping effect in a Central-European student group, and by showing that educational content rather than compensation, drives initial attractiveness. Finally, the results challenge humour-first recruitment theories, since a preference for humorous posts does not moderate the deterrent impact of negative reviews. These three points refine employer branding theory by specifying the boundary conditions under which platform choice, content tone and reputational valence interact for Generation Z in Poland.

## 6. Conclusions

Several key implications for practice emerge from these results. Organisations should actively manage their social media presence, ensuring that published content aligns with the expectations of potential employees. Authenticity is a crucial component of an effective employer branding strategy, therefore companies should avoid generic messaging and instead highlight the genuine values they offer employees. Additionally, organisations should prioritise online reputation management, as negative reviews can significantly influence their attractiveness to prospective candidates (Cable & Turban, 2003).

Despite its valuable findings, the survey has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, it focused exclusively on students from universities in Wrocław, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other demographic groups. Moreover, the survey did not incorporate the perspective of employers, which could have provided valuable insights into the effectiveness of specific employer branding strategies. Future research should address these gaps by broadening the analysis to include a more diverse audience and integrating the organisational perspective to achieve a more comprehensive assessment of employer branding effectiveness.

Based on the survey results, future research could: (1) expand the analysis to other demographic groups, such as young professionals from various industries or students from different cities and countries; (2) examine the employer perspective to assess the effectiveness of employer branding strategies from an organisational standpoint; and (3) investigate the long-term effects of employer branding activities, particularly their influence on employee loyalty and retention. Scholars could employ longitudinal or experimental designs to test causality, replicate the model in other CEE cities or among early-career employees, and incorporate multi-item validated scales of employer-brand authenticity (particularly as brand authenticity positively affects brand forgiveness) (Papadopoulou et al., 2023), and explore platform-specific humour tactics such as user-generated memes (Brubaker et al., 2018). Examining demographic moderators identified in recent large-sample studies – for example, economic, social, development-interest, reputation, and giving less importance to application-diversity and working environment attractiveness – would further refine segment-specific recommendations especially for younger generations (Mostafa, 2022).

Looking ahead, at least four focused lines of inquiry emerge. **Research Question-A** of *How does the perceived fairness of AI-mediated screening influence Polish Gen-Z application intent?* can be tested via a  $2 \times 2$  online vignette experiment (human vs. AI screener  $\times$  positive vs. neutral reviews) with intention-to-apply as the dependent variable. **RQ-B:** *Do internal employees' brand perceptions mediate the link between external campaigns and applicant interest?* requires a multisource, dyadic survey that pairs HR managers with current employees from the same firms and models relationships via structural-equation modelling. **RQ-C:** *How do employer branding preferences differ between urban and rural Polish students?* could be addressed through a stratified, probability-cluster sample of universities across Poland (target  $N \approx 600$ ) followed by multi-group SEM. **RQ-D:** *Does initial exposure to skill-oriented and humorous content predict retention in first jobs?* calls for a three-wave longitudinal panel that tracks Wrocław graduates for 18 months and analyses departures using survival models.

Complementary qualitative research such as a netnography of TikTok employer campaigns or sentiment mining of Polish review platforms would triangulate these quantitative designs. Pursuing these specific questions and methods should deepen understanding of employer branding's effectiveness across channels, groups and time, and move the field beyond single-city cross-sectional snapshots.

In conclusion, the research findings underline the significance of employer branding in social media and highlight the need for a comprehensive strategy incorporating educational content, and engaging communication formats. Organisations that effectively align their activities with the expectations of young candidates and strategically manage their online reputation are likely to enhance their recruitment effectiveness and strengthen their competitive position in the labour market.

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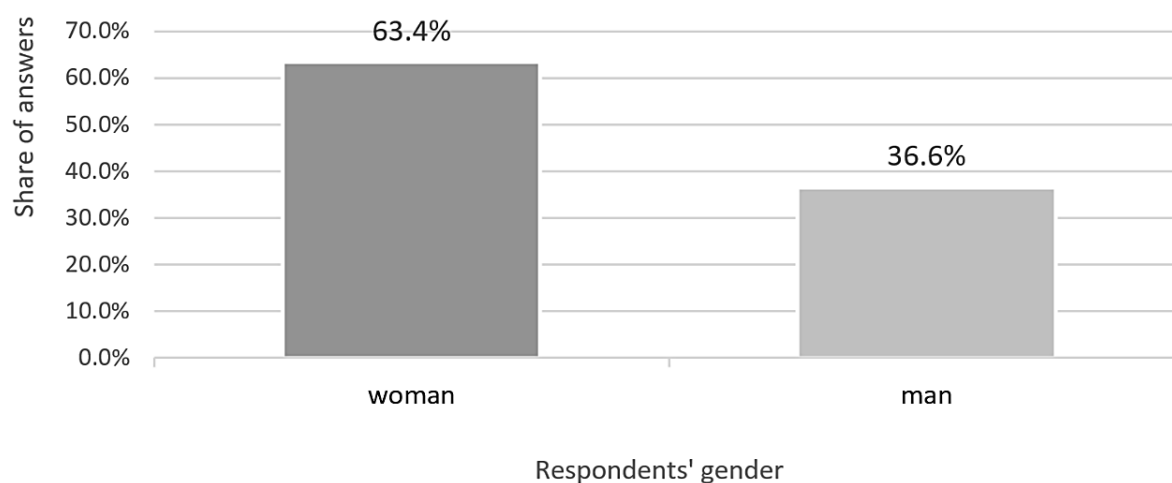
## Appendix

### Appendix 1. Are you a student?

Are you a student?	Number of answers	Percentage of all answers
Yes	101	96.2%
No	4	3.8%
Total	105	100%

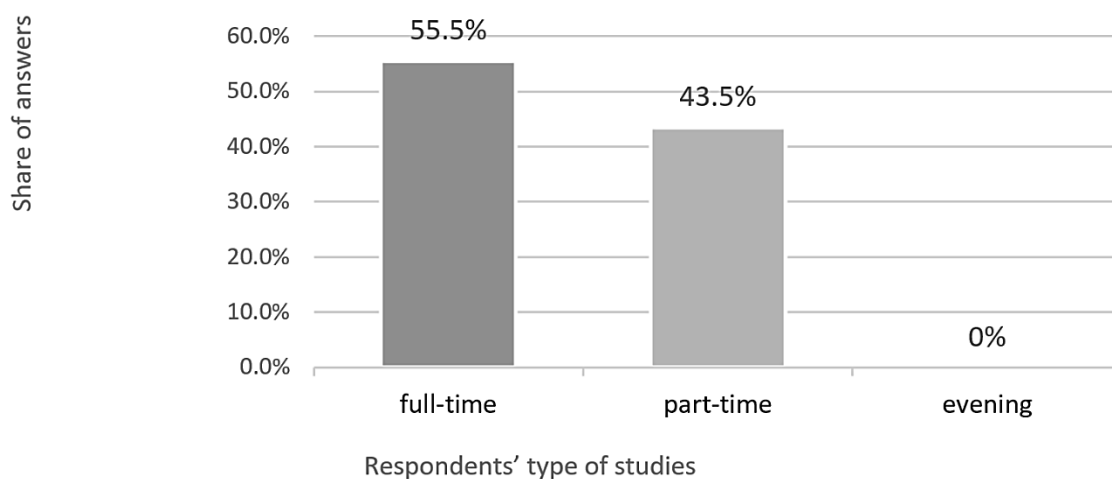
Source: own elaboration.

### Appendix 2. Responders' gender



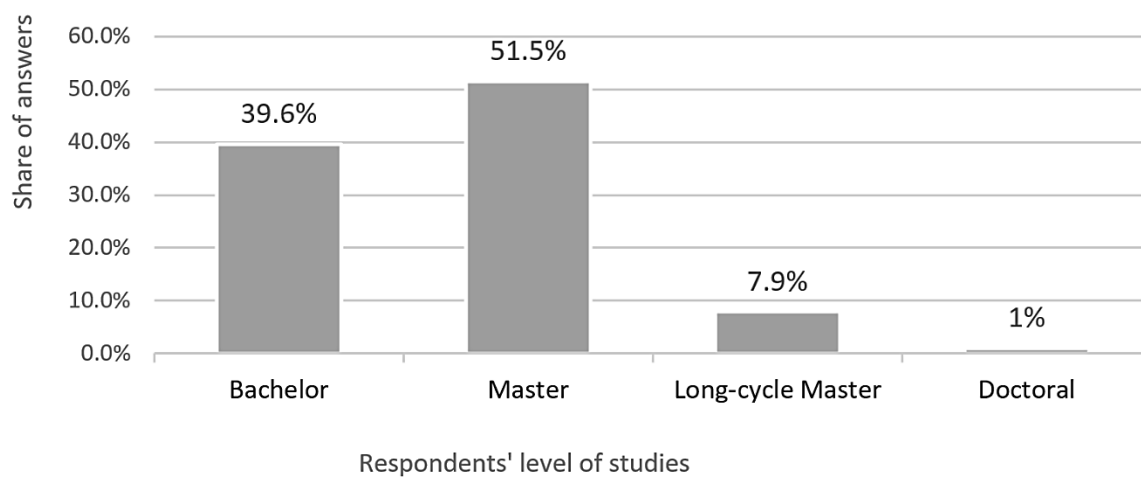
Source: own elaboration.

Appendix 3. Respondents' type of studies



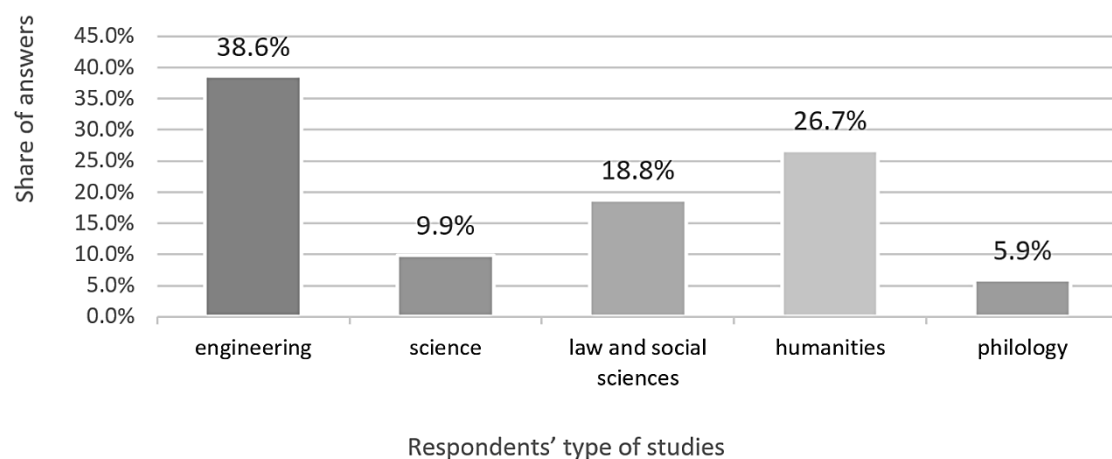
Source: own elaboration.

Appendix 4. Respondents' level of studies



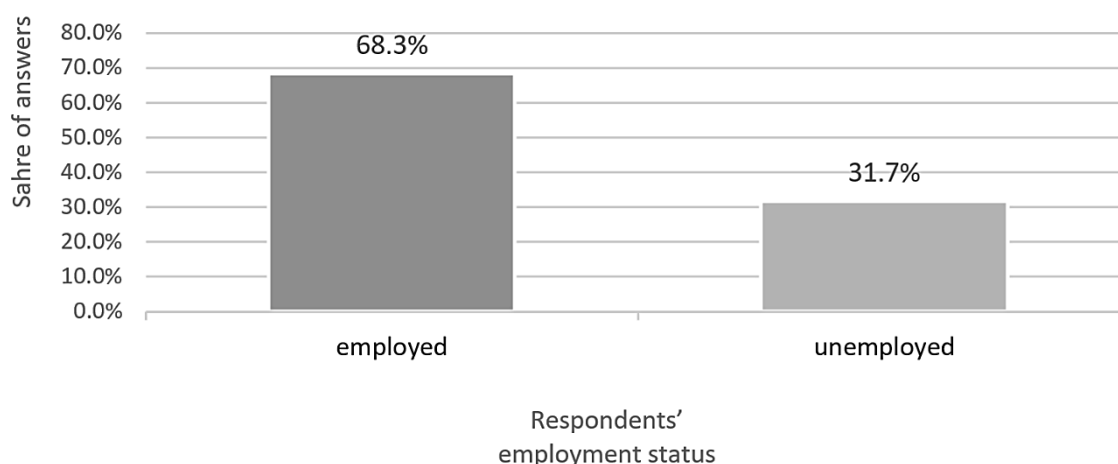
Source: own elaboration.

Appendix 5. Respondents' type of studies



Source: own elaboration.

## Appendix 6. Respondents' employment status



Source: own elaboration.

## Employer branding w mediach społecznościowych – badania empiryczne i spostrzeżenia dla praktyki gospodarczej

### Streszczenie

**Cel:** Celem artykułu jest ocena zachowań i opinii młodych osób studiujących na uczelniach wyższych we Wrocławiu na temat employer branding. Badanie dotyczy rosnącej konkurencyjności na rynku pracy i potrzeby skutecznej komunikacji organizacji z potencjalnymi pracownikami na wczesnym etapie ich kariery.

**Metodyka:** Badanie opiera się na sondażu diagnostycznym przeprowadzonym wśród studentów, uzupełnionym o przegląd literatury na temat employer branding jako koncepcji teoretycznej i zjawiska empirycznego.

**Wyniki:** Analiza danych pozwoliła określić, które działania employer brandingowe są najskuteczniejsze dla młodych osób wchodzących na rynek pracy. Dane pokazują, że 89,1% respondentów sprawdza aktywność firmy w Internecie przed złożeniem aplikacji, a 67,3% respondentów nie chciałoby aplikować do firmy z negatywnymi recenzjami online. Ważnym wnioskiem z badania jest wysoki poziom zainteresowania humorystycznymi treściami (41,6%), co sugeruje rosnące znaczenie nieformalnej komunikacji w budowaniu relacji między pracodawcami a kandydatami.

**Implikacje i rekomendacje:** Wyniki badań mogą być wykorzystane przez organizacje do optymalizacji strategii employer brandingowych, spełnienia oczekiwań młodych potencjalnych pracowników i zwiększenia efektywności rekrutacji. Kluczowe jest zrozumienie preferencji studentów i inwestowanie w programy stażowe oraz inicjatywy wspierające ich rozwój zawodowy na wczesnym etapie kariery.

**Oryginalność/wartość:** Niniejsze badanie zapewnia unikalną perspektywę osób dopiero wchodzących na rynek pracy, wypełniając istotną lukę w istniejących badaniach nad employer brandingiem. Wyniki oferują cenne spostrzeżenia dla zarządzania zasobami ludzkimi w różnych firmach.

**Słowa kluczowe:** employer branding, zarządzanie marką, wizerunek pracodawcy, media społecznościowe