THE ROLE OF SOCIAL PROJECTS IN SHAPING A UNIVERSITY'S IMAGE – A CASE STUDY OF "BEE IN THE CITY"

Katarzyna BRENDZEL

Czestochowa University of Technology; katarzyna.brendzel@pcz.pl, ORCID: 0000-0003-1654-7046

Purpose: With the development of the market economy, the situation in the domestic market for educational services provided by universities has changed. Currently, it is characterized by increasing difficulties in attracting service recipients. Due to the demographic decline, the number of potential candidates for studies is decreasing, and some of them choose to study abroad. On the other hand, there is a large number of educational offerings, but their evaluation and selection are hindered by the intangible and specific nature of the service. In this situation, universities' image-building activities become a natural instrument for competing in the market. The essence of these activities is systematic communication with both the internal and external environment of the university to gain its approval (meet or exceed its expectations) and thus achieve a favorable market position. This raises the question: Do social projects implemented by universities contribute to building their positive image?

Design/methodology/approach: The aim of the presented study was to verify the claim that the implementation of social projects is an effective tool for building a positive image of Czestochowa University of Technology, using the example of the project "Been in the City". The study was conducted using a questionnaire survey. The research group consisted of high school students and teachers cooperating with the University, as well as university students and academic staff.

Findings: The study found that through social projects, the University fulfills its educational mission and engages internal stakeholders in solving local community problems. Social projects are an effective tool for building positive relationships with the environment, which is a crucial element of image building. Such initiatives must not be isolated or incidental, as inconsistent efforts may, over time, erode the University's credibility and have a detrimental impact on its institutional reputation and public perception.

Originality/value: The article outlines the principles of effectively utilizing a university's social engagement to shape its image. It emphasizes the importance of identifying stakeholders' needs and communicating valuable content. The study recommends implementing the concept of social engagement within the Czestochowa University of Technology.

Keywords: university, university image, social engagement, green university.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

The Higher Education Act, implemented in the 2019/2020 academic year, explicitly highlighted the need for a new perspective on the role and position of scientific and research institutions in the educational and research market. Consequently, this also raised the issue of building the image and reputation of these institutions. The new legal conditions governing their operations, combined with evolving socio-economic factors (broadly understood) and the necessity of internationalizing education and scientific research, have led to the need for re-evaluating many existing activities and tools used to shape the image and reputation of institutions in this sector (Gołata, Sojkin, 2020). This is particularly important in terms of their competitiveness—not only at the regional or national level but also in the international dimension—as well as in building relationships with the environment, including cooperation with internal and external stakeholders.

The university's environment consists of highly diverse and evolving groups of stakeholders (both internal and external), each with distinct expectations towards the institution (Piotrowska-Piątek, 2016). In this context, the assessment of the university's image and reputation will be a derivative of fulfilling these expectations, as well as addressing and creating new, innovative proposals. According to the author, a university should build a coherent image that is communicated in various ways through diverse communication channels. Different aspects come into focus when the university seeks to attract prospective students by shaping its image among high school students and their parents—highlighting its academic and teaching potential as well as the career prospects of its graduates (Uroda, 2014). On the other hand, when the university aims to establish partnerships with businesses that provide financial and substantive support, it primarily emphasizes its research and scientific potential, offering potential fields of collaboration with industry and the mutual benefits that arise from such cooperation.

Social projects appear to be an effective tool for building a university's image among various stakeholder groups (Gołata, Sojkin, 2020). The article presents the assumptions of the "Bee in the City" project, which has been implemented by the Czestochowa University of Technology in cooperation with partners since 2022. This example demonstrates that a university's social engagement is positively perceived by a wide range of stakeholders. This suggests that social projects are an effective and universal tool for shaping a university's image. The growing engagement in such initiatives is supported by the evolving awareness of local communities. This dynamic requires universities to observe their environment, respond to changes, and leverage current trends.

2. Stakeholder relations in shaping a university's image

In the subject literature, the distinction between image and reputation is primarily based on the time perspective of both concepts and the actions undertaken to communicate with stakeholders (Balmer, Gray, 2000; van Riel, Balmer, 1997; Vogler, Post, 2019). Reputation reflects long-term interactions (relationships) and the experiences that arise from them, forming a historical record of experiences. In contrast, image refers to the current, immediate, and most recent experience—an assessment of the institution's present external perception (Skowronek, 2012). Reputation is the result of images created based on behaviors, noticeable and recorded effects stemming from actions in the communication process, as well as the symbolism of a higher education institution. In the case of image and reputation, much has been written on the subject, particularly in the field of marketing, and mainly from the perspective of public relations, which aligns more closely with the concept of reputation as a reflection of an institution's image and position within its environment. In contrast, image is associated with the value of the relationship–opinion–evaluation as perceived by clients (Gołata, Sojkin, 2020). The author uses these terms interchangeably, as they focus on the same factors and generally serve almost identical purposes — namely, creating a desired image of the institution, as perceived by its management and stakeholders. This image is significant in the context of trust and the evaluation of the institution within a multidimensional market space, considered over both short- and long-term perspectives. For this reason, the author also introduces the term *visual identity* in the study to emphasize the importance of the institution's image in its environment.

The approach to interpreting these concepts and defining their scope is particularly important in the context of actions aimed at achieving a designated market position. This is especially relevant when considering these terms from the perspective of stakeholders. The development of relationships within a higher education institution should be understood as various forms of engagement in cooperation with internal and external stakeholders. The goal is to fulfill the tasks outlined in the institution's statute and strategy while securing the desired market position. Collaboration can take multiple forms, including education, communication, consultations, dialogue, coordination, partnership, research, commercialization, control, auditing, and the implementation of experiences and achievements (Grucz, 2012). A crucial aspect of shaping relationships is ensuring openness to changes occurring in the external environment and addressing emerging future challenges. These challenges are not limited to economic or political spheres but also include social, technological, and environmental aspects (Cymanow-Sosin, 2017). In the market environment, each of these collaborative approaches can take different forms depending on the objectives, the expected scope of cooperation, and the established operational principles. Additionally, the nature of these relationships is influenced by their stage—whether at the beginning,

development, maturity, or conclusion. The literature emphasizes that the implementation phase, relationship structure, and form of cooperation determine the value of these relationships (Storbacka, Lehtinen, 2001). Furthermore, it is important to highlight that both image and reputation represent a collective assessment of an institution's attractiveness to a specific group of stakeholders, particularly in comparison to other institutions competing for available resources. Therefore, relationship-building efforts should be individualized, considering the comparative and competitive nature of a university's image and reputation. Table 1 presents the groups of university stakeholders, categorized into internal and external stakeholders.

Table 1.
Internal and external stakeholders of the university

Internal stakeholders	External stakeholders
Rector	**Public administration:**
Senate, University Council	Local government
Employees:	Political parties and politicians
Executive Authorities	Government authorities
Academic and Teaching Staff,	Local community
Research Staff, Technical Staff	**Economy:**
Administrative Staff	Enterprises and institutions
University Students and Prospective Students	Business people
Internal Organizations:	Labor market institutions
Student Government	*Companies supporting the university*
Student Organizations	**Environment:**
Trade Unions	Domestic higher education institutions
Retirees and Pensioners	Foreign higher education institutions
Others:	Scientific and research institutions
Alumni	Science funding institutions
Partners	Scientific community
Special Purpose Entities	Scientific and research organizations
	Secondary schools:
	Local
	Regional
	Traditional media (national and regional) and social media
	Social organizations
	Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)

Source: Gołata, Sojkin, 2020, p. 34.

The group of internal stakeholders includes the university's rector, the senate, and university councils. This classification directly results from the provisions of the new Higher Education and Science Act, which grants these bodies new and significant competencies in university governance (Gołata, Sojkin, 2020). The rector holds a particularly important position as the creator of the university's structure and vision for its future development. The rector's leadership and personality can be a key factor in shaping the university's image and reputation in the evolving landscape of higher education in Poland. The rector is responsible for conducting scientific research, providing research services, and transferring knowledge and technology to the economy. Among other stakeholders, the most influential group consists of academic and research staff, who play a crucial role in shaping the market value of the university's re and reputation, both in daily operations and over the long term. Additionally, students and their families, as well as internal organizations, form two other vital groups that

contribute to building the university's image and, consequently, establishing a strong reputation. The remaining stakeholder groups serve to complement both the image and reputation of the university. As previously mentioned, the ways in which these relationships are realized change over time, and it is difficult to define a single, unified image. Instead, multiple images are formed by different groups, each contributing to the development of a cohesive, distinctive, and well-defined university reputation.

In the case of external stakeholders, the number of groups is significantly larger than that of internal stakeholders. Consequently, the forms of relationships and ways of establishing them are much more diverse. This is influenced by factors such as the educational offer, ownership structure, the number of external funding sources (projects, programs, grants), the intensity of interactions with the business environment, and the extent of collaboration with competitors. Thus, the cooperation between a university and its external stakeholders takes on highly varied forms. Additionally, the direction and strength of relationships between these stakeholders differ significantly (Piotrowska-Piątek, 2016).

A university thus has a substantial and diverse group of stakeholders, with whom building and maintaining relationships is a necessity in today's education market. Image is becoming an increasingly important attribute for any organization, particularly for higher education institutions. Effective communication with the external environment and relationship-building have become essential attributes of institutions that must respond to the challenges of the so-called new economy (Waszkiewicz, 2011). It is difficult to disagree with the perspective expressed by P. Morschheuser and J. Redler, who state that reputation, as an organizational characteristic, "is perceived as the key to competition in the market" and is "a crucial factor for future success" (Morschheuser, Redler, 2015).

The literature on the subject includes several studies on the image and reputation of Polish higher education institutions. For example, A. Waszkiewicz conducted research on several Polish universities, including Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Jagiellonian University, Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz, as well as the universities of Opole, Rzeszów, and Warsaw. The study focused on faculties of humanities and mathematics (Waszkiewicz, 2011). The research involved a population of over 700 respondents, and the author analyzed the university image through seven dimensions: moral authority, educator, creator of science and culture, employer, investor, financially supported entity, and knowledge transmitter. Meanwhile, the previously mentioned A. Piotrowska-Piątek focused her research on the stakeholders of Polish higher education institutions, including both public academic universities (as well as state vocational universities) and non-public institutions (Piotrowska-Piątek, 2016). These studies covered entities operating under the supervision of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education. The core research was preceded by a pilot study conducted in four universities in the Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship—one public and three non-public institutions.

These studies confirm that an institution's image results from interactions, perceptions, and acquired knowledge. Image is often shaped by opinions and the emotional attitudes of its audience (Ryłko-Kurpiewska, Łosiewicz, 2019). The perception of an organization is subjective and formed through the process of observation. Therefore, the image of a higher education institution is the sum of all impressions about that institution. This image is constructed based on the university's identity—its unique set of characteristics, norms, and values that distinguish it from its surroundings and make it easily recognizable. A university's identity is shaped by academic staff, administrative employees, and the student community. It is developed through clearly defined objectives and the institution's flagship strengths, which are emphasized in its communication with stakeholders (Wrzochul-Stawinoga, 2015).

3. Social engagement in university image building

Universities are increasingly leveraging social engagement as a key element in shaping their image. This applies both to preparing graduates for roles as knowledge workers in the evolving knowledge-based economy and to establishing strong ties with the business community and local government. According to K. Leja, a university fulfills its social responsibility only if it evolves into an organization that serves its environment (Leja, 2008). University social responsibility (USR) is, in fact, the equivalent of corporate social responsibility (CSR), as described by H. Ansoff, who referred to such organizations as "environment-serving organizations" (Ansoff, 1985). B. Wawrzyniak emphasizes that "a traditionally understood public institution must primarily meet the expectations of a diverse group of stakeholders" (Wawrzyniak, 2004), which constitutes the essence of its social responsibility. J. Sutz identifies a transformation in universities, which, in addition to their two traditional roles—educating students and conducting scientific research—are now undertaking a third, increasingly significant role: fostering mutual relationships with their environment (Sutz, 1997). This third mission is becoming a crucial factor in shaping a university's image. The "green university" concept plays a vital role in developing these relationships (Malinowska et al., 2023). Universities are implementing initiatives aimed at minimizing their negative environmental impact and promoting sustainable practices in education, research, and infrastructure (Geng et al., 2013). These actions align with the principles of the green university model and contribute to the positive image of institutions that proactively respond to contemporary challenges (Finlay et al., 2012).

In Poland, a Working Group on University Social Responsibility was established within the Team for Sustainable Development and Corporate Social Responsibility at the Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy. The group's objective is to promote the principles of university

social responsibility, as defined by the academic community in the Declaration of University Social Responsibility. This declaration represents the voluntary commitment of higher education institutions to integrating sustainable development and social responsibility principles into educational programs, as well as in university governance and organizational solutions. According to information published by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (2024), 65 higher education institutions were signatories of the Declaration in 2017, increasing to 83 in 2019 and further expanding to 160 universities by 2022. In 2019, the first Catalogue of Good Practices in University Social Responsibility was published, showcasing initiatives from 40 Polish universities. By the 2022 edition, 53 universities contributed to the catalog.

According to the author, one of the key actions universities should undertake in this area is the implementation of initiatives that are significant for local communities—namely, the realization of social projects. On the one hand, universities fulfill their educational mission, while on the other, they engage internal stakeholders in addressing community issues, thereby fostering relationships with their environment. The author argues that certain conditions must be met for social initiatives to be effectively utilized in university image-building: the university must respond positively—but not uncritically—to stakeholder expectations; the degree to which stakeholder expectations are met is crucial in shaping the university's image; the selection of appropriate communication tools to promote social initiatives is essential.

4. Methodology of own research

A literature review indicated that the topic of building and managing a university's image through social engagement is rarely addressed. A search of databases (including Scopus, Web of Science, and Elsevier) yielded over 2000 publications on university image-building. An analysis of these publications in terms of research focus and data relevance showed that only 12 addressed the use of social projects in shaping a university's image. Most publications presented best practices in this area.

The aim of the study presented in this article is to verify the view that implementing social projects by a university is an effective tool for building a positive image. On one hand, the university fulfills its educational mission, while on the other, it engages internal stakeholders in addressing community issues, thereby fostering relationships with its environment. The study focuses on the project "Bees in the City," implemented by the Czestochowa University of Technology in collaboration with partners. This project was selected due to its broad range of stakeholders, including both internal (faculty, students) and external (elementary and secondary school students, parents, and the local community), as well as the diversity of activities undertaken within its framework.

"Bees in the City" is a partnership project that has been implemented since 2022, involving the Czestochowa University of Technology, the W. Reymont School of Fashion and Advertising Industry in Czestochowa, the Investor Service Center of the City of Czestochowa, the M. Skłodowska-Curie School of Gastronomy, and the Czestochowa branch of the League for Nature Protection. "Bees in the City" is an educational project aimed at children, school youth, university students, and the entire local community. It promotes knowledge about the role of bees in the natural environment and highlights the necessity of greening urban areas. Each edition of the project involves several kindergartens and primary schools from Czestochowa and the surrounding region. Educational institutions host thematic lessons and meetings with beekeepers. In previous editions:

- Video materials were developed on the life of bees, their importance in nature, and the properties of honey.
- Under the guidance of teachers and high school students from the M. Skłodowska-Curie School of Gastronomy, holiday pastries were made using honey.
- Dozens of flower beds and lawns located near educational institutions and within the Czestochowa University of Technology campus were sown with nectar-rich plants.
- An art competition titled "The Bee—A Friend of Humans" was organized.
- Bee hotels for mason bees and other pollinators were installed on the university campus. Initially, there were plans to establish an apiary on campus, but a regulation by the Czestochowa City Council excludes this area from livestock farming.
- Green space development on the university campus began, with landscaping efforts initiated by Landscape Architecture university students in 2024.
- High school students from the W. Reymont School of Fashion and Advertising Industry, along with Wioletta Podsiadlik, designed a bee-inspired clothing collection and organized a fashion show. The collection was made from eco-friendly and certified fabrics.

The study was conducted among high school students and teachers from 16 partner schools of the Czestochowa University of Technology, as well as the university's students and staff. The analysis focused on the following areas: the university's visual identity, reputation, project implementation quality, marketing communication, social engagement, and loyalty. To achieve the study's objective, the following questions were formulated:

P1: What conditions must be met for a university's social engagement to be an effective tool for building its positive image?

P2: Do university social projects contribute to building long-lasting and loyal relationships with stakeholders?

The presented empirical research was conducted using a quantitative method between October and December 2024 through an online survey questionnaire. The survey was carried out via the interankiety.pl platform. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended questions with

a five-point Likert scale to assess specific phenomena, as well as explanations of key concepts and a demographic section. The study was of a pilot nature. It aimed to determine whether modifications to the online survey questionnaire were necessary in terms of clarity and comprehensibility. This will enable further research on building a university's positive image.

5. Presentation of research results

A total of 408 individuals participated in the study, including 180 high school students and 32 teachers, as well as 140 university students and 56 academic staff members (Figure 1).
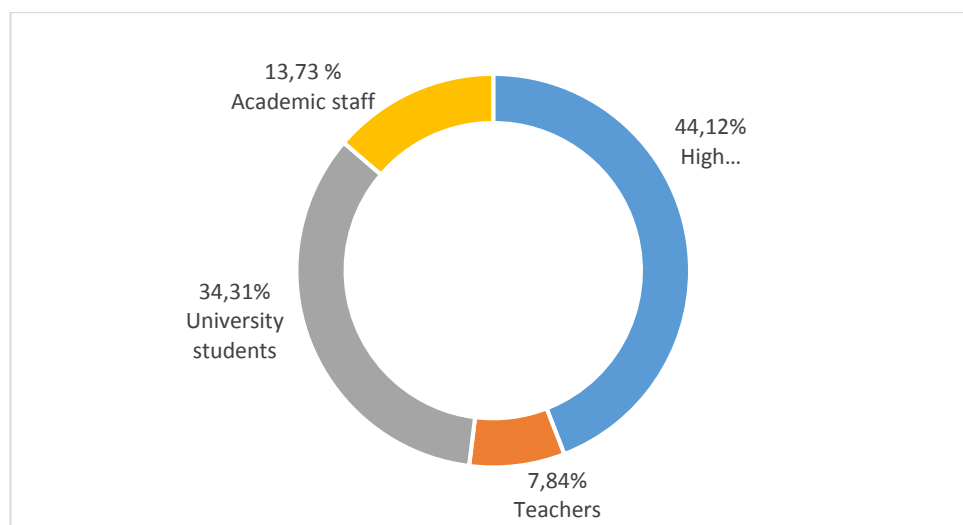

Figure 1. Characteristics of respondents.

Source: own research.

Table 2 present a detailed characterization of the research group. The vast majority of respondents participated in activities offered by the Czestochowa University of Technology, primarily workshops and educational projects. 65% of the respondents took part in the "Bee in the City" project.

Table 2.

Characteristics of the study group

Respondents	Yes	No
Participation in the "Bee in the City" project	65%	35%
Participation in educational projects of Czestochowa University of Technology	83%	17%
Attendance at workshops/lectures [*]	94%	6%

[*] applies to high school students and teachers.

Source: own research.

The study results confirmed that the implementation of social projects by the university is an effective tool for building a positive image. Through the "Bee in the City" project, Czestochowa University of Technology fulfills its educational mission. The research showed

that nearly 80% of surveyed academic staff learned about the existence of mason bees and their significant environmental role, despite the fact that they do not produce honey. Both students and university staff participated in the transformation of green areas within the academic campus. Notably, university students from Landscape Architecture and Design and Project Management programs played a key role in this process. In this way, internal stakeholders actively contribute to addressing a major community issue—urban concretization.

The study results indicate that social projects are an effective tool for building strong and lasting relationships between the university and its external stakeholders (Fig. 2). In particular, high school students and university students rate the activities of Czestochowa University of Technology in this area very positively. The university's social engagement is also rated highly, although respondents note that this involvement often consists of individual initiatives rather than a comprehensive strategy. As shown in the figure below, all key areas essential for shaping the institution's image received high ratings from all respondent groups.
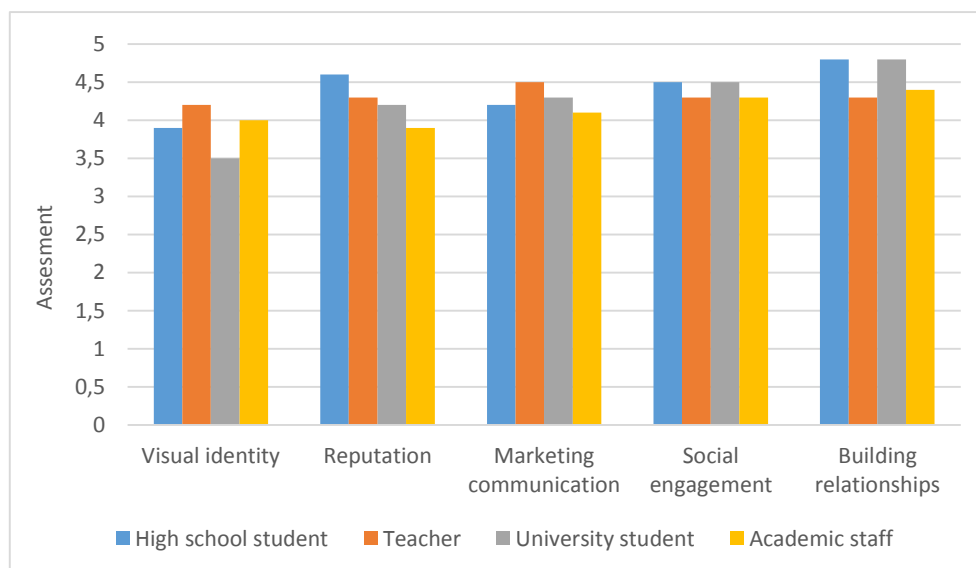

Figure 2. Evaluation of Key Areas for Building a Positive University Image: The Case of "Bee in the City".

Source: own research.

In the case of the study on "visual identity" and "reputation," the evaluation of these areas was compared between participants and non-participants of the "Bee in the City" project. In both cases, these areas received high ratings. It is not surprising that the ratings were higher among project participants by 0.5 and 0.3 points, respectively (Fig. 3).
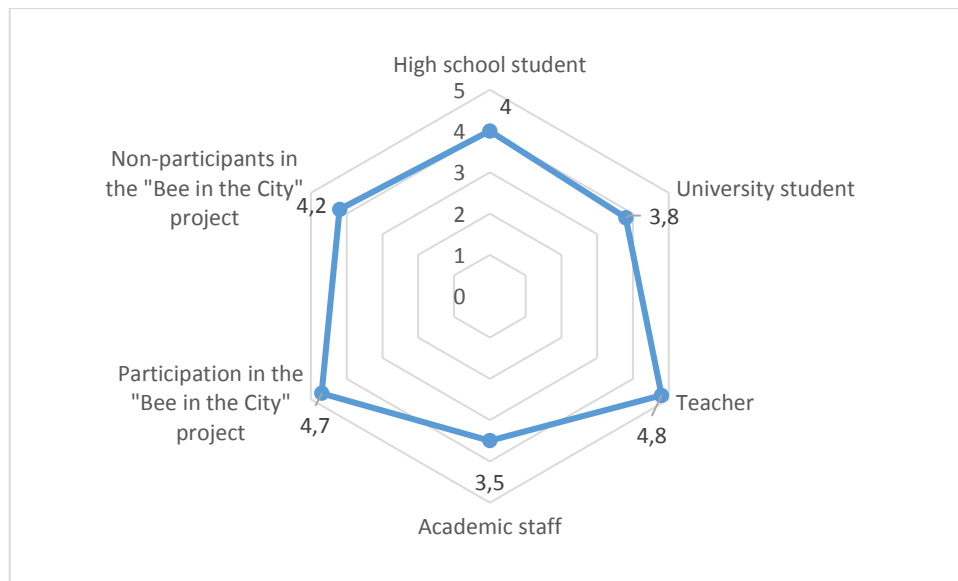
Figure 3. Visual Identity of the University in the Opinion of Respondents.

Source: own research.

The research results indicated the positive aspects of implementing social projects in building the positive image of Czestochowa University of Technology. Engagement in the "Bee in the City" project, especially its continuation and expansion with new activities, was recognized as a unique value characterizing the University.

The study confirmed that implementing social projects is an effective tool for building a university's positive image. The "Bee in the City" project allowed Czestochowa University of Technology to fulfill its educational mission while actively engaging internal and external stakeholders in addressing social and environmental issues. The results showed that participation in the project positively influenced perceptions of the university's visual identity and reputation, with higher ratings among those directly involved. Moreover, while the university's social engagement was highly rated, some respondents, particularly academic staff and students, noted that these efforts often take the form of isolated initiatives rather than a broader strategy. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of long-term commitment to social projects in strengthening stakeholder relationships and reinforcing the university's distinctive identity. The continuation and expansion of "Bee in the City" were recognized as key factors in shaping a sustainable and community-oriented institutional image.

6. Conclusion

The study highlighted a crucial aspect of leveraging university social engagement in building its public image. To ensure that social projects effectively contribute to a university's positive reputation, the following conditions must be met:

- Consistent communication of project activities – all marketing and communication efforts must align with the university's core values.
- Identification and fulfillment of stakeholder needs – during the implementation of the Bee in the City project, stakeholder needs assessments led to the expansion of activities. Respondents recognized this as a unique value. The internal stakeholder relationship, particularly with university students and faculty, sparked the idea of creating a green relaxation zone on campus.
- Creating valuable and inspiring content for the local community – the fashion collection created within the project raised awareness about the environmental impact of textile production and its influence on quality of life.
- Using diverse communication channels tailored to the audience – project-related content is shared through partner websites, social media accounts, YouTube channels, as well as local TV and press publications.
- Consistency and credibility in action – respondents emphasized the importance of the project team's dedication to building strong relationships with stakeholders.

By adhering to these principles, universities can effectively integrate social engagement into their brand identity, strengthening their relationships with both internal and external stakeholders.

The study suggests that the Bee in the City project could serve as a catalyst for implementing the Green University concept at Czestochowa University of Technology. Respondents, particularly university students and academic staff, highlighted key aspects related to enhancing the university's public image:

- Institutionalizing social engagement – instead of limiting efforts to isolated social projects, a structured approach to long-term social engagement is needed. Apart from Bee in the City, respondents mentioned only blood donation campaigns and animal shelter fundraisers as existing social initiatives.
- Involving the academic community in environmental actions – encouraging sustainable behaviors such as cycling, reducing paper consumption, conserving water, electricity, and heating energy, and improving waste segregation practices.
- Collaborating with external stakeholders on environmental initiatives – undertaking joint efforts with the local community to protect and improve the local environment.
- Promoting volunteerism within the academic environment – strengthening and encouraging student and faculty involvement in volunteer programs.
- Integrating social responsibility into the curriculum – university students pointed out a lack of content related to corporate social responsibility (CSR) in academic courses.

Further research is needed on the aspect of potential risks, such as the threat of greenwashing or stakeholder fatigue. Excessive exposure to such initiatives without real impact may weaken stakeholder trust and negatively affect the university's image. This strengthens the

argument for the necessity of institutionalizing social engagement. The long-term effectiveness of social projects depends on their integration into the strategic framework of the university. These insights underline the need for a comprehensive sustainability strategy at the university, ensuring that social and environmental engagement becomes an integral part of its identity rather than a series of isolated efforts.

Adhering to these conditions ensures the development of a positive image for Czestochowa University of Technology while preventing social projects from being perceived merely as branding efforts. This justifies the continuation of research within the university's academic environment, focusing on the implementation of the concept of social responsibility within the institution.

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