

IMAGE OF NATIONWIDE ASSOCIATION OF OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY WORKERS (OSPSBHP)

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Aim: Identification of the brand image of the Polish Association of Occupational Health and Safety Service Employees (OSPBHP).

Design and methods: A survey was conducted on a sample of 78 people. Quantitative and qualitative text analysis was used to analyze the results. The quantitative analysis examined the frequency of occurrence as well as associations and connections between attributes.

Conclusions: It was found that when analyzing the image of the OSPSBHP brand, two of its dimensions were found. First of all, it is the first professional organization based on knowledge in the field of occupational safety, acquired through experience and training. Secondly, it enables cooperation between associated people who can count on mutual help and support. These contacts are professional in nature, but they can also take on a more personal dimension - transform into friendship. Taking into account the association analysis, OSPSBHP is a professional knowledge-based organization.

Practical implications: Information was obtained about the attributes that create the image of the OSPSBHP brand, i.e. the recipients' idea of it. On this basis, it can be suggested to take actions within the marketing mix aimed at creating an attractive image of the examined brand.

Limitations: Small sample size in the empirical study, as well as the limitations of the survey questionnaire. The structure of the sample was not examined.

Contribution: Innovative measurement of the OSPSBHP brand image based on an original methodology. Conclusions from quantitative and qualitative text analysis.

Keywords: image, association, occupational health.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

Introduction

In contemporary discourse, increasing emphasis is placed on the understanding of organizations as aggregations of the interests of multiple stakeholders (Kotas, 2014). Through their influence, stakeholders determine the scope and direction of organizational activities

(Mitchell, Agle, Wood, 1997). As noted by M. Kotas (2014), a critical determinant of success for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is the degree of satisfaction among stakeholders within their environment. The establishment of an effective system of marketing communication between NGOs and stakeholders constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for organizational effectiveness (Bryson, 2004). A particularly significant instrument in this process is the brand image of the organization (Scott, Lane, 2000). Unlike commercial entities, NGOs are subject to distinct conditions in shaping their image. According to Sondej (2016), they must convincingly demonstrate to their environment that they effectively pursue socially significant goals while refraining from profit orientation. Kwaśnicki (2005) further emphasizes that NGOs are compelled to reconcile the differing rationalities ascribed to the market, the state, and society.

As Jasiocki (2004) observes, the concept of “brand” is employed in three principal senses (SJP, 1979). The first is cognitive and descriptive in nature, referring to the trademark identifying the producer. In the second sense, a brand is understood evaluatively, eliciting associations and emotions. The third interpretation relates to the broader climate, atmosphere, and social image attached to the brand. The notions of brand identity and brand image are inherently abstract, encompassing a set of characteristics and perceptions attributed to the brand. These function within the mind of the creator of the marketing message (identity) as well as within the mind of its recipient (image) (Lotko, Lotko, 2020).

Empirical studies (Przewłocka, Adamiak, Herbst, 2013) demonstrate that social engagement is strongly correlated with public perceptions of NGOs. The more favorable the image of such organizations, the greater the propensity of society to engage in philanthropy and volunteering. Moreover, this relationship is reciprocal: higher levels of civic engagement and more frequent interactions with NGOs translate into more positive evaluations of their activities. This underscores the strategic importance of building and managing organizational image. Against this backdrop, the present study addresses the following research question:

RQ: What is the brand image of the selected professional association – the National Association of Occupational Health and Safety Service Employees (OSPSBHP)?

Consequently, the aim of the analysis was to identify the brand image of OSPSBHP.

Research Methodology

To identify the scope and significance of the research problem, a literature review was conducted using the Google Scholar database. The following search phrases were applied:

- “occupational health and safety association brand”,
- “occupational health and safety association image”,

- “NGO brand”,
- “NGO image”.

The literature search was carried out in March 2024. For the purpose of analysis, results from the first two pages generated by the search engine were selected. The results of these studies were then analyzed. Based on these findings, the significance of the problem addressed was determined. They also identified a research gap, which this study sought to fill.

In order to identify brand image attributes – that is, the way the brand is perceived by consumers – an empirical survey was conducted on a sample of 78 respondents. The study took place during the International Trade Fair for Work Protection, Fire-Fighting, and Rescue (SAWO) in Poznań, held between 22 and 24 April 2024. Participants were asked to list three attributes (features, associations, values) of the brand, ordered according to the strength of association. They completed the printed survey questionnaire directly.

The collected data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative analysis involved frequency analysis as well as association and linkage analysis. Specifically, (1) the frequency of occurrence of individual associations and (2) the structure of sequences—that is, the order in which associations appeared across data records—were examined. Statistical analysis was carried out using the Statistica 13.0 software package, employing the Sequence, Association, and Linkage (SAL) analysis tool within the Data Mining module. A cloud of tags was generated using the Word Art software.

Brand Image

A brand constitutes one of the key intangible assets (Diaz-Soloaga, Fernandez-Blanco, 2017; Saxena, Dhar, 2021). It performs an identificatory function, promises benefits, and, above all, shapes image (Michalski, 2003). It creates messages, associations, and emotions (Kotler, Armstrong, 2008; Kall, 2002, 2006). A brand is recognized as a symbolic, emotional, and transient construct, subject to subjective interpretation (Sułkowski, 2012; Escalas, Stern, 2013; Hammerl et al., 2016).

The notion of brand image derives from the Latin language, meaning model, prototype, reflection, or representation (Kotas, 2014; Dębski, 2009). Building a desirable brand image is regarded as a central objective of marketing communication activities (Czubała et al., 2006; Lotko, Lotko, 2020). The brand image serves multiple functions: identificatory (enabling the recognition of benefits), simplifying (facilitating choice), risk-reducing (ensuring the expected benefits are delivered), and loyalty-shaping (Altkorn, 1999; Aaker, 2010).

As early as the 1980s, the brand image began to be strongly linked with consumer behavior (Saxena, Dhar, 2021). Findings from empirical research have highlighted the growing importance attributed to brand image (Ogba, Tan, 2009). It has been demonstrated that

a properly shaped brand image positively influences perceived value, satisfaction, and ultimately, consumer loyalty. Studies conducted in this field have consistently shown that image constitutes a critical component of brand equity (Hsieh et al., 2004).

The brand image is inherently subjective (Altkorn, 1999; Czubała et al., 2006). As noted by Łuczak (2011), it comprises two components: cognitive and affective. In the case of non-governmental organizations, the cognitive component stems from knowledge about the organization's activities, familiarity with individuals involved in its operations, as well as the transparency and ethical assessment of its conduct. The affective component, by contrast, is predominantly linked to the characteristics of the recipient's profile. For this reason, individuals may perceive the image of the same organization in markedly contrasting ways. M. Kotas (2014), drawing on J. Altcorn (1999), observes that a discrepancy typically exists between the desired and the actual image. This gap most often arises from a misalignment between identity attributes and stakeholder expectations, discrepancies between declared and actual behavior, ineffective communication, and environmental variability. Effective branding, therefore, entails creating an image that is appropriate to the brand, positive in perception, and easily retained in memory (Saxena, Dhar, 2021).

The Role of Associations in Society

Since the mid-twentieth century, organizations have been classified into three major socio-economic sectors (Bogacz-Wojtanowska, 2016; Pilch, 2018). The first is the public sector, responsible for meeting citizens' needs in accordance with existing legal regulations. The second consists of enterprises and is associated with business activity. The third sector, often referred to as the civic sector, comprises initiatives and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Pilch, 2018). The dissemination of the term "third sector" is most frequently attributed to Levitt (1973) and Touraine (1985). Formed primarily by foundations and associations, it constitutes an essential component of building civil society (Sarzała, 2012). Indeed, the voluntary association of individuals to pursue common objectives is regarded as one of the fundamental indicators of social trust (Czapiński, Panek, 2015). As scholars emphasize, social trust is not only a key element in the development of civil society (Pilch, 2018; Gulińska, 2023) but also an important vehicle of social capital (Janoś-Kresło, 2011).

As Gulińska (2023) further argues, a defining feature of such a societal model is the participation of free, conscious, and responsible citizens in shaping the principles by which modern society operates. The emergence and development of civic organizations are predicated upon the activity of individuals and social groups, understood as their involvement in defining organizational objectives, principles, methods, and forms of action (Gulińska, 2023). One form of such organizations is the association. Their functioning is governed by the Law on

Associations of 7 April 1989 (Journal of Laws, 2020). An association is defined as (1) voluntary, (2) self-governing, and (3) permanent, with non-profit objectives (Journal of Laws, 2020). The first feature, voluntariness, is primarily expressed through the constitutional right to freedom of association (Gulińska, 2023). The second, self-governance, refers to the autonomy in shaping organizational structures, defining membership criteria, setting tasks, and determining the scope and intensity of activity. Associations are goal-oriented organizations, whose aims may be internal-focused on satisfying members' needs, or external, directed toward serving external stakeholders. The third feature, permanence, pertains to the durability of organizational objectives, independent of the continued participation of individual members (Gulińska, 2023).

According to data from the Central Statistical Office of Poland, in 2022 there were 103.4 thousand non-profit organizations operating in the country, encompassing 8.3 million members (GUS, 2023). Self-governing organizations enjoy strong public support and trust. More than 62% of respondents believe they are necessary, and 56% express trust in them (KJ, 2020). Notably, this trust is independent of citizens' actual contact with NGOs, suggesting that such organizations inherently evoke positive associations. Approximately 53% of respondents consider NGOs to be more effective than state institutions, while 39% report perceiving tangible effects of their activities on a daily basis (KJ, 2020).

A particular type of association is the professional association, which unites individuals practicing a specific profession. The role of such associations includes (CAZ, 2024):

- disseminating knowledge within a given field,
- initiating and supporting scientific and technical creativity,
- conducting research activities,
- safeguarding the collective interests of the profession,
- representing the interests of the profession,
- fostering integration among practitioners,
- supporting professional development,
- providing opinions and expert assessments,
- cooperating with external stakeholders,
- engaging in informational and publishing activities,
- supporting social initiatives.

It is precisely this type of association that forms the subject of the present analysis.

History and Contemporary Role of OSPSBHP

In Poland, within the occupational health and safety (OHS) service community, several organizations with the legal status of associations are active. Their objectives include educational and promotional activities concerning working conditions and labor law, the establishment of professional standards, the safeguarding of ethical principles, and the enhancement of members' knowledge, skills, and competencies (Prawo, 2008). The largest of these is the National Association of Occupational Health and Safety Service Employees (Ogólnopolskie Stowarzyszenie Pracowników Służby BHP, OSPSBHP) (Lotko, 2023). Established on 7 January 1993, it has operated continuously to the present day (OSPSBHP, 2023). The Association comprises 37 regional branches with a total membership of approximately 2,700 individuals (Bożejewicz, 2023). Its statutory objectives are pursued through the voluntary engagement of its members and include (OSPSBHP, 2023):

- creating organizational, legal, and functional conditions for the integration of OHS service employees,
- representing and protecting the professional, social, and legal interests of members,
- promoting awareness of occupational health and safety issues,
- providing opinions on new legal and organizational solutions related to occupational health and safety,
- safeguarding the dignity of OHS service employees and ensuring adherence to professional ethics,
- fostering the development of members' skills and knowledge.

The activities undertaken by the Association's branches primarily consist of training sessions designed to improve knowledge, skills, and competencies; workshops for novice OHS practitioners; seminars; conferences; technical visits to workplaces; experience-sharing events; educational picnics; study visits; OHS knowledge contests; and art competitions for children, adolescents, and workers (OSPSBHP, 2023). In 2022 alone, the Association organized 195 such initiatives, which attracted a total of 12,800 participants (Bożejewicz, 2023).

The Association also actively contributes to the implementation of national social campaigns promoting workplace safety and the protection of workers. These campaigns are coordinated by the Central Institute for Labour Protection – National Research Institute, the National Labour Inspectorate, and the Office of Technical Inspection, with the support of the Social Insurance Institution (OSPSBHP, 2024). Figure 1 presents the Association's logo, in use since 1 January 2022.



Figure 1. OSPSBHP logo.

Source: (OSPSBHP, 2024).

According to the members of the Association, affiliation provides inspiration, support, access to knowledge, professional development, experience exchange, a sense of community, guidance, and mutual assistance (Bożejewicz, 2023). The same author emphasizes that the OSPSBHP brand should be consistent, modern, professional, and active - a brand image actively promoted by the Association's management.

Research Problem in the Light of Literature Review

The conducted literature review revealed a limited number of studies devoted to the topic under investigation. At the outset, it is worth noting a certain concentration of research: many of the identified scientific works were produced at the Faculty of Management and Social Communication at Jagiellonian University in Kraków. These studies address, among other topics, employer brand creation using the example of an association (Gryz, 2016), the use of storytelling in shaping the image of non-governmental organizations (Handzel, 2022), building the brand of a selected association (Heród, 2014), shaping NGO image in social media (Słonka, 2014), and the relationship between organizational identity and the image of self-governing organizations (Ślusarczyk, 2014). The issue of storytelling in NGO branding is also addressed by McCarthy (2021) among foreign authors and by Rodak (2023) among Polish scholars. Brand image as an element of effective NGO communication with the environment is analyzed by Kotas (2014), while Pilch (2018) examines methods for shaping it. Łuczak (2011) further elaborates on issues of brand image creation and management, and Sondej (2016) provides a more comprehensive discussion on NGO communication with stakeholders and the role of brand image in this process.

In addition, there are findings from independent studies on the image of NGOs, particularly those conducted by the Klon/Jawor Association (Przewłocka, Adamiak, Herbst, 2013; KJ, 2020). These studies include analyses of knowledge sources and perceptions of NGOs, public trust and assessments of their credibility, as well as societal expectations regarding their functioning and communication with stakeholders (Adamiak, 2015). Several authors, including Gulińska (2023), Sarzała (2012), and Janoś-Kresło (2011), extensively discuss the role of

associations as significant actors in contemporary civil society. Other scholars examine the role of professional associations (Bożejewicz, 2023; CAZ, 2024).

Challenges related to the brand image of NGOs partly stem from the fact that many organizations do not devote sufficient attention to promotional activities (Adamiak, 2015). Few provide information about their activities on their websites or maintain contact with members and interested parties through modern communication channels (Przewłocka, Adamiak, Herbst, 2013). It is therefore evident that, although the subject of NGO brand image—particularly that of associations—is somewhat represented in the literature, none of the identified studies have specifically addressed professional associations within the occupational health and safety sector. Consequently, this issue has been deemed worthy of scholarly investigation.

Analysis of Empirical Study Results

The collected data allowed for a textual analysis. Since respondents were asked to identify attributes (features, values), answers containing proper names of institutions or geographic locations were excluded. The most frequently reported associations with the examined brand are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

The ten most frequent associations with the OSPSBHP brand based on the survey

No.	Association	Occurrences
1	Knowledge	19
2	Professionalism	17
3	Safety	14
4	Assistance	11
5	Support	10
6	Cooperation	9
7	Experience	7
8	Contacts	7
9	Friendship	5
10	Trainings	5

Source: authors' own elaboration.

Preliminary statistical analysis of the data in Table 1 indicates that the brand is most frequently associated with three concepts: knowledge, professionalism, and safety (with 19, 17, and 14 mentions, respectively). This suggests that the Association's image conveys the creation and dissemination of occupational safety knowledge, while also connecting professionals and promoting professional service delivery. These three associations therefore reflect the professional character of OSPSBHP.

The next three identified attributes pertain to an organization that unites collaborating individuals (9 mentions), who, through cooperation, can rely on assistance (11 mentions) and support (10 mentions). The following association concerns the acquisition of professional experience (7 mentions), which is also related to the professional dimension of the organization. The remaining attributes reflect social relations: contacts (7 mentions) and friendship (5 mentions). The final frequently mentioned attribute is training (5 mentions).

In summary, the identified associations correspond to two dimensions of the Association's activities: (1) professionalism – attributes 1, 2, 3, 7, 10; and (2) social relations – attributes 4, 5, 6, 8, 9. This analysis is visually represented in a tag cloud shown in Figure 2.

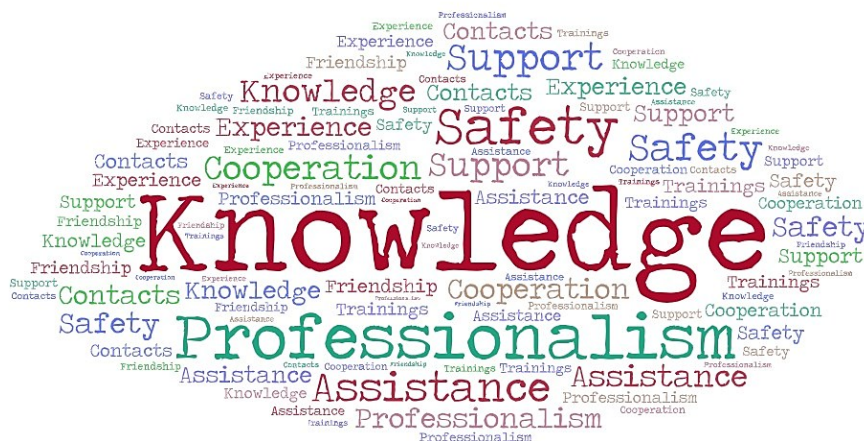


Figure 2. Cloud of tags for the most frequent associations with the brand OSPSBHP.

Source: authors' own elaboration.

Based on the interpretation of the results presented in Figure 2, it can be concluded that the OSPSBHP brand is primarily perceived as a professional organization grounded in occupational safety knowledge, acquired through experience and formal training. The second dimension of the brand image concerns the collaboration among affiliated individuals, who can rely on mutual assistance and support. These interactions are primarily professional in nature but may also develop a more personal dimension, evolving into friendships. Synthesizing these preliminary findings, OSPSBHP can be characterized as a professional association based on knowledge that facilitates the establishment and maintenance of meaningful social relationships.

The results of the association analysis, organized according to the order of mentions, are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.*Associations with the OSPSBHP brand in order of occurrence*

Association					
First	Count	Second	Count	Third	Count
Safety	11	Assistance	6	Knowledge	8
Professionalism	9	Professionalism	6	Cooperation	4
Knowledge	6	Experience	5	Trainings	3
Assistance	4	Knowledge	5	Support	3
Friendship	3	Support	4	Safety	2
Support	3	Contacts	3	OHS	2
OHS	2	Development	3	Experience	2
Information flow	2	Community	3	Sharing knowledge	2
Group	2	Cooperation	3	Contacts	2
Integration	2	Ergonomics	2	People	2
Contacts	2	Competence	2	Content	2
Cooperation	2	Unity	2	Protection	2
Brotherhood	1	Competencies	2	Professionalism	2
Interesting training	1	Loyalty	2	Friendship	2
Consulting	1	Protection	2	Power	2
Sharing knowledge	1	Trainings	2	Common goals	2
Quality	1	Engagement	2	Audits	1
Unity	1	Ambition	1	Determination	1
Competencies	1	Safety	1	Good climate	1
Conferences	1	Discipline	1	Good food	1
Creativity	1	Acting together	1	Ergonomics	1
OHS culture	1	Professional ethics	1	Group	1
Lance	1	Evolution	1	Companionship	1
Numerous	1	Group	1	Competencies	1
Connecting different branches	1	Idealism	1	Creativity	1
Modernity	1	Innovations	1	Supervision	1
Openness	1	Cronyism	1	Non profit	1
Politics	1	Companyship	1	Innovations	1
Job	1	Conferences	1	Objectivity	1
Team work	1	Passion	1	Responsibility	1
Prestige	1	Politics	1	Organisations	1
Development	1	Fire protection	1	Openness	1
Reliability	1	Promotion	1	Beautiful greenery	1
Power	1	Rules	1	Politics	1
Professionals	1	Risk	1	Assistance	1
Tradition	1	Meetings	1	Practical	1
Multigenerationality	1	Regularity	1	Practic	1
Influence	1	Chance	1	Reliability	1
Community	1	Fun	1	Seminars	1
Reach	1	Trust	1	Contributions	1
Collectivity	1			Community	1
				Old	1
				Structures	1
				Chance	1
				News	1
				Trust	1
Number of associations	41		40		46

Source: authors' own elaboration.

The analysis of the data presented in Table 2 indicates that the associations across all groups are highly diverse. The first group contains 41 associations, the second 40, and the third 46. This finding is corroborated by the sequence analysis, which did not reveal any recurring sets of associations with the OSPSBHP brand. This outcome reflects the aforementioned high variability of the variables. Conducting a non-sequential (i.e., “weaker”) association analysis produced the results shown in Table 3.

Table 3.

Results of non-sequential association analysis of associations with the OSPSBHP brand

Association	Number of elements	Count	Support [%]
Professionalism	1	17	21,79
Knowledge	1	19	24,36

Source: authors' own elaboration.

Analysis of the data in Table 3 leads to the conclusion that the most frequently occurring associations with the examined brand, regardless of their order of mention, were professionalism (17 mentions) and knowledge (19 occurrences). Based on these findings, OSPSBHP can be characterized as a knowledge-based organization that brings together professionals.

Managerial Implications and Recommendations

Brand policy does not necessarily have to involve aggressive promotion, nor does it require substantial financial resources (Adamiak, 2015). It is important to distinguish between simply informing stakeholders about organizational activities and engaging in professional promotion. The latter is conducted by very few organizations with appropriate resources. As Adamiak (2015) further notes, there are examples among associations and foundations of conscious brand-building, with the key factor being the effective use of available communication channels to reach the environment.

The Association's management (Bozejewicz, 2023), in shaping the brand image, emphasizes that it should be consistent, modern, professional, and active. The empirical study primarily highlighted the aspect of professionalism (attributes of knowledge, professionalism, and safety), followed by activity (support, cooperation, acquiring experience, and establishing and maintaining contacts).

Several recommendations, drawn from the literature, are particularly relevant for building the Association's brand image (Hernik, 2016; Adamiak, 2015; Pilch, 2018), and are perhaps best summarized in BW (2021):

- Actions build reputation. The brand image of a social organization is most influenced by its actions. Therefore, the foundation of conscious image-building should be the quality of initiatives and projects undertaken.
- Evaluating projects in the context of image-building. Activities should be planned with consideration of how they may impact the organization's image. It is useful to analyze whether a given initiative supports the way the Association aims to be perceived.
- Emphasizing the organization's credo. To build the brand image, the organization's identity must first be defined (Lotko, Lotko, 2020). This identity should then be intensively communicated in promotional messages, confronting potential recipients with the promoted values.
- Clarifying outcomes of completed projects. Communication should not only focus on current or planned activities but also identify and disseminate the results of past initiatives. It is valuable to document and publish evidence of undertaken actions, share positive stories about the experiences of both recipients and members, and employ storytelling (Rodak, 2023; Handzel, 2020; McCarthy, 2021).
- Highlighting experts. It is important to emphasize that professionals are actively engaged in the Association's activities. These voices should be leveraged in promotional messages, ensuring that communications come from experienced, competent individuals aware of real-world challenges.
- Expanding beyond the bubble. New media can be used to reach a broader audience. Opening up to collaboration with various information distributors can yield highly positive effects.
- Understanding the audience. Identifying the target audience of the Association's activities allows for recognition of their expectations and needs. With this knowledge, actions can be more effective, contributing to an improved brand image.

Many other guidelines – both conceptual and practical – regarding the shaping of an organization's image are available in the literature (Łuczak, 2011; Schimanek, 2006; Przewłocka, 2011; Adamiak, 2015; Kotas, 2014; Pilch, 2018; Słonka, 2014; Gryz, 2016; Hernik, 2016).

Summary and Conclusions

As a result of the conducted analysis, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. Based on the empirical assessment of the OSPSBHP brand image, it can be characterized as a professional association grounded in knowledge, enabling the establishment and maintenance of meaningful social relationships. Specifically, two dimensions of the Association's image were identified: (1) professionalism –

a professional organization based on occupational safety knowledge acquired through experience and training; and (2) social relations – an organization that facilitates collaboration among affiliated individuals, offering mutual assistance and support within professional contacts, which may evolve into friendships.

2. The sequence analysis did not reveal any recurring sets of associations defining the examined brand image.
3. The non-sequential association analysis indicated that the most frequently occurring associations, regardless of their order of mention, were professionalism (17 mentions) and knowledge (19 occurrences). Based on these results, OSPSBHP can be described as a professional, knowledge-based organization.

Overall, the obtained brand image appears to align with the objectives set by the Association's management (Bozejewicz, 2023). The indicated recommendations may be applied to further strengthen the brand.

Research Limitations

The primary limitation of this study was the small sample size of 78 respondents. Additionally, the measurement of brand image was highly simplified, being limited to listing three associations. However, due to temporal constraints during the SAWO trade fair, it was not feasible to implement a more complex study.

Directions for Future Research

Future research could consider more complex analyses, for instance, based on in-depth interviews or storytelling (Handzel, 2020; McCarthy, 2021).

It would also be worthwhile to examine the relationship between the Association's image and the engagement of its members in organizational activities. The analysis could employ modeling of the relationships between perceptions of the organizational brand and members' declared attitudes and behaviors, thereby enabling an assessment of the role of reputation in building long-term relationships (Fombrun, van Riel, 2004).

It also appears justified to conduct comparative research involving other professional organizations in the field of occupational safety, which would make it possible to identify the specific characteristics and distinctive features of the OSPSBHP's image. Such an approach would facilitate the identification of factors that contribute to building a strong brand of

an expert organization in the social sector and allow for an assessment of its competitive position (Cornelissen, 2020).

In light of contemporary trends, another promising direction for future research would be to analyze the role of online communication (website, social media, expert publications) in shaping the perceived professionalism and credibility of the Association (Cees, van Riel, Fombrun, 2007).

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