

FACTORS DETERMINING PROMOTIONAL AND IMAGE-BUILDING ACTIVITIES OF VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS

CZYNNIKI DETERMINUJĄCE DZIAŁANIA PROMOCYJNE I WIZERUNKOWE
SZKÓŁ ZAWODOWYCH

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the factors influencing the promotion and image-building activities of vocational schools in Poland, with a focus on the Podlaskie Voivodeship (one of Poland's fifteen regions). Using structural analysis and the MICMAC methodology, the research identifies key variables shaping vocational education promotion, including external factors like competition in the education market, generational attitudes of students, and regional economic development, as well as internal factors such as schools' initiative-taking capacity, awareness of promotional needs, and relationships with employers. Expert stakeholder evaluations are analyzed using a structured methodology, ensuring that identified factors and relationships reflect insights from professionals and stakeholders in the vocational education sector. Significant interdependencies were found among factors, emphasizing the pivotal role of relationships with employers and the adaptive use of social media as a goal-oriented tool for communication. Findings underscore that effective promotion of vocational education requires a strategic approach integrating internal strengths with external collaborations to address stakeholder needs, improve societal perception, and enhance competitiveness. Key recommendations include fostering relational capital, involving employers in defining school missions, and aligning promotional strategies with dynamic labor market demands and technological advancements.

Key words: educational marketing, promotion in education, vocational education, structural analysis.

ABSTRAKT

Badanie dotyczy czynników wpływających na działania promocyjne i budowanie wizerunku szkół zawodowych w Polsce, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem województwa podlaskiego. Wykorzystując analizę strukturalną oraz metodologię MICMAC, zidentyfikowano kluczowe zmienne kształtujące promocję szkolnictwa zawodowego, w tym czynniki zewnętrzne, takie jak konkurencja na rynku edukacyjnym, postawy pokoleniowe młodzieży i rozwój gospodarczy regionu, a także czynniki wewnętrzne, takie jak inicjatywność szkół, świadomość potrzeb promocyjnych i relacje z pracodawcami. Analiza opierała się na ocenach interesariuszy przeprowadzonych przy użyciu ustrukturyzowanej metodologii, co pozwoliło uwzględnić perspektywy specjalistów i praktyków związanych ze szkolnictwem zawodowym. Wyniki badań wskazują na istotne współzależności między czynnikami, podkreślając kluczową rolę relacji z pracodawcami oraz elastycznego wykorzystania mediów społecznościowych jako narzędzia komunikacji. Wnioski sugerują, że skuteczna promocja szkolnictwa zawodowego wymaga strategicznego podejścia, które integruje wewnętrzne mocne strony z zewnętrzną współpracą, aby zaspokoić potrzeby interesariuszy, poprawić społeczną percepcję i zwiększyć konkurencyjność. Na podstawie wniosków rekomenduje się działanie na rzecz rozwoju kapitału relacyjnego, większe zaangażowanie pracodawców w kształtowanie misji szkół oraz dostosowanie strategii promocyjnych do zmieniających się potrzeb rynku pracy i dynamicznego postępu technologicznego.

Słowa kluczowe: marketing edukacyjny, promocja w edukacji, edukacja zawodowa, analiza strukturalna.

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1. Introduction

Vocational education is a significant sector of the education system in Poland. It comprises a number of pathways: three-year first-level vocational schools (providing qualifications in specific professions), two-year second-level vocational schools (allowing students to take the matriculation exam and continue their education at higher education institutions), five-year technical schools (offering vocational qualifications and, after passing the matriculation exam, enabling university studies), and three-year special schools preparing students for work (designed for those with special educational needs) (Wasilewska & Matuszak, 2019). This form of education contributes to improving the competitiveness of enterprises and national economies (Rauner & Maclean, 2008) and is significant due to its direct link to the conditions of the local and global labor markets (Samujło, 2014; Sztanderska & Grotkowska, 2019; Stasiak, 2011). Besides developing professional competencies crucial from employers' perspectives, vocational schools also enhance self-organizational, social (Kwaśniewski & Kęsy, 2022; Billet, 2011), and

entrepreneurial skills (Rachwał, 2019). Despite its advantages, however, vocational education in Poland faces challenges related to its public image (Lis & Miazga, 2016). There is a noticeable decline in the number of students attending basic vocational schools in favor of general education (Sitek & Stasiowski, 2022). This trend is indicative of a need to intensify promotional activities that contribute to popularizing this form of education.

The aim of this study is to develop a system of factors seen as influencing the promotional and image-building activities of vocational schools and to identify the relationships within it. Here, a “system of factors” is understood as a set of interrelated elements that correspond to the specifics of the phenomenon under study and shape it. The study adopts a structural analysis approach, recognizing the multidimensional nature of promotion and image as key marketing concepts, as well as the need to consider multiple perspectives in their explanation and evaluation. The conclusions are based on research findings from the project entitled: “Promotional and Image-Building Activities of Vocational Schools in the Podlaskie Voivodeship – Models, Tools, Effectiveness,” which provided a range of expert and stakeholder evaluations regarding the importance of factors shaping vocational education in the Podlaskie Voivodeship (one of Poland’s 15 regions, or voivodships, which is situated in the northeastern corner of the country). Analysis was then conducted using a structured methodology, ensuring that identified factors and relationships reflect insights from professionals and other expert stakeholders in the vocational education sector.

2. Background: the promotion of vocational education as a tool of educational marketing – specificity and scope

Promotion is a critical component of educational marketing, serving to achieve both the external and internal goals of a school organization by addressing the needs of its stakeholders – students, teachers, parents, and employers – as effectively as possible (Żebrok, 2015). It reflects the application of marketing methods and strategies within the education sector, positioning promotion as both a form of service marketing and a type of social marketing. Marketing activities in education aim to build long-term relationships with stakeholders and deliver value as part of the educational process (Manea & Purucaru, 2017). Educational marketing can also be understood as a market management process, wherein educational institutions at all levels create educational services to support their survival and growth by improving educational efficiency and delivering high-quality services (Yang, 2016).

Functionally, educational marketing is a structured process that involves the analysis, planning, implementation, and control of activities aimed at ensuring the exchange of value between an educational institution and its target group. This, in turn, facilitates

building lasting relationships with key stakeholders by delivering value through educational services and products (Glava & Glava, 2015).

The promotion of educational services has a threefold objective: to inform, persuade, and remind potential recipients about the institution's educational offerings. It encompasses both traditional and digital marketing tools used to increase enrollment and strengthen the institution's image (Kumar & Kaur, 2022). Educational promotion can be defined as:

- A set of comprehensive informational and persuasive actions that influence the growth of sales and demand for provided services;
- An effective way of communicating with the market, where deliberate influence on buyers is achieved by conveying appropriately developed information through various channels (Wierenko, 2015).

Today, in the search for ways to gain a competitive advantage, increasing attention is being given to values that are important to the recipients of educational services. Promotion serves as a tool to showcase and disseminate messages based on these values (Witczak, 2013). The value of a school's offer lies in its ability to meet the specific needs of its stakeholders (students, parents, and employers) by delivering satisfaction more effectively than competing educational institutions with similar offerings operating in comparable market segments (cf. Zupok, 2018; Hajduk, 2019). The specific goals of school promotion include:

- Building brand awareness;
- Creating a positive reputation and image of the school as friendly to stakeholders (including the entire student community, all parents, teachers, and the local community);
- Enhancing prestige (the school's significance) in the opinion of local government and educational authorities;
- Strengthening the school's competitive position in the constantly changing educational services market, thereby ensuring growth by highlighting the school's uniqueness (its vision and mission) and through innovations in processes, products, and systems;
- Showcasing the achievements and potential of the school community – thereby generating a synergistic effect;
- Recruiting students who match desired profiles and increasing student numbers (e.g., by fostering loyalty and genuine emotional engagement);
- Attracting, continuously developing, and retaining the best teachers, who are adaptable and open to change;

- Establishing and maintaining partnerships, securing funding (e.g., from EU resources), and attracting sponsors and desirable partners necessary for achieving the school's defined objectives;
- Managing relationships by fostering positive emotional bonds (based on trust, affection, and the school's credibility within the local community – e.g., through alumni clubs);
- Building customer satisfaction (for parents and partners of the school) and reducing decision-making (“post-purchase”) dissonance by reinforcing confidence in the correctness of their choice (Hajduk-Stelmachowicz, 2019).

In developing the competitive advantage of educational services, the profiling of services and consistent development of the school's image are of great importance (Krzyżak, 2000), as is the process of effective value exchange (Colan et al., 2019).

Marketing for vocational education focuses on communication activities designed to create and maintain a positive image of vocational education within society. Its purpose is to enhance understanding and acceptance of this form of education through strategic communication actions that highlight the benefits of curricula, future employment opportunities, the quality of teaching, and financial accessibility (Pimpa & Suwannapirom, 2008; Al-Malood & Pretorius, 2006). The promotion of vocational education, in turn, encompasses activities aimed at increasing awareness, interest, and engagement in vocational education through various tools and communication strategies. These efforts include:

- Adapting curricula to the needs of the labor market;
- Utilizing new media for communication;
- Emphasizing the practicality and modernity of vocational education;
- Fostering a positive image of vocational education;
- Involving employers in establishing real connections between educational institutions and the labor market (Wu & Liang, 2023).

The scope and complexity of promoting vocational education stem from the diversity of stakeholders and, consequently, their varying expectations and needs. Numerous interdependencies exist among these stakeholders (cf. Hall, 2007; Zieliński & Grudowski, 2014). Students (current and prospective students), as both internal and external stakeholders, expect more than just professional training: they expect emotional support, individualized educational programs, the development of social and professional competencies (Włodarczyk & Ziarko, 2017), and, in the case of vocational schools, preparation for labor market demands.

Parents play an active or formal role in the educational process by participating in school life and co-contributing to the educational process (Szymańska, 2008). For parents of vocational school students, it can be assumed that they were co-decision-makers in their children's school choice, and thus they compare the current reality to their expectations of the school. Parents of primary school students, who participate in choosing their child's secondary school, are also significant recipients of vocational schools' offerings and promotional efforts.

Teachers are internal stakeholders and specialists adequately prepared to conduct educational and pedagogical work in educational institutions (Żegnałek & Gutkowska-Wyżykowska, 2016). They significantly influence how the quality of educational services is assessed by students and parents.

Employers constitute another crucial group of stakeholders. Without their involvement, vocational education would not be able to fulfill its functions. Entrepreneurs aim to actively participate in shaping the mechanisms of vocational education, but report that they currently feel insufficiently involved in this process. They emphasize the need to strengthen of vocational education through measures such as the following (Kongres Przedsiębiorczości, 2011):

1. Building a positive image of vocational education and implementing an inter-ministerial media and social campaign.
2. Introducing and promoting a dual education system that combines theoretical learning with practical training in the workplace.
3. Strengthening the role of employers and their organizations in relations with state and local government administrations.
4. Diversifying informational and advisory activities for young people choosing their educational and professional development paths.
5. State patronage over traditional and unique professions to preserve and promote specialized skills.

The promotion of vocational education and the image of such education are complex constructs. Their scope depends on numerous factors rooted not only within the educational sphere but also in the economic environment. Promotion is shaped by the evolving needs of stakeholders, posing challenges to its effectiveness. On the other hand, promotion remains a fundamental prerequisite for enhancing the image of vocational education as a valued form of education.

In summary, by addressing stakeholder needs, fostering employer involvement, and strategically communicating benefits, vocational education can gain greater societal recognition and attain greater competitiveness.

3. Research methodology

This study draws upon research findings from the project entitled: “Promotional and Image-Building Activities of Vocational Schools in the Podlaskie Voivodeship – Models, Tools, Effectiveness,” carried out by the present author as part of the broader project KPO/22/LLL/U/0004 entitled “Building a system for coordinating and monitoring regional activities for vocational education, higher education, and lifelong learning, including adult education,” led by the Voivodeship Labor Office in Białystok.

A survey was carried out between March and October 2024, covering organizations and institutions (including vocational schools and enterprises) that form the vocational education system in the Podlaskie Voivodeship (subregions: Białystok, Łomża, and Suwałki). Respondents included a range of professionals and other stakeholders: students of vocational schools, primary school students, parents of vocational and primary school students, teachers from vocational and primary schools. The research was conducted by a research team from the Department of Economics and Finance at University of Łomża, consisting of: Urszula Widelska (research leader), Marta Wiacek, Anna Kowalczyk-Kroenke, Krzysztof Borawski, Wioletta Ryś, and Anna Kokot.

In the present study, structural analysis then employed to analyze expert evaluations, where representatives of organizations, practitioners, and researchers specializing in vocational education assessed the mutual influences of factors using a structured matrix approach. This method is used as a tool for organizing and analyzing systems characterized by a significant number of diverse factors with mutual interactions (Nazarko et al., 2013). Structural analysis helps identify the mutual influences and relationships among factors, to ultimately pinpoint key variables (Nazarko et al., 2011; Gulc, 2020).

The MICMAC program was used to study and compare the hierarchy of individual variables, taking into account their direct and indirect influences. This approach provides a rich source of information about the system under analysis (Wójcicki, 2008). The strength of structural analysis lies particularly in its ability to identify connections between variables whose mutual influences are not obvious and may remain unrecognized even by experts in the field. Structural analysis conducted using the MICMAC program allows the variety of factors influencing a given research area to be categorized into the following groups:

- key factors;
- goal factors;
- result factors;
- auxiliary factors;
- decisive factors (drivers and barriers);

- regulatory factors;
- external factors;
- autonomous factors.

Key factors combine a high degree of influence with a high level of dependency. This relationship is graphically represented in Figure 1.

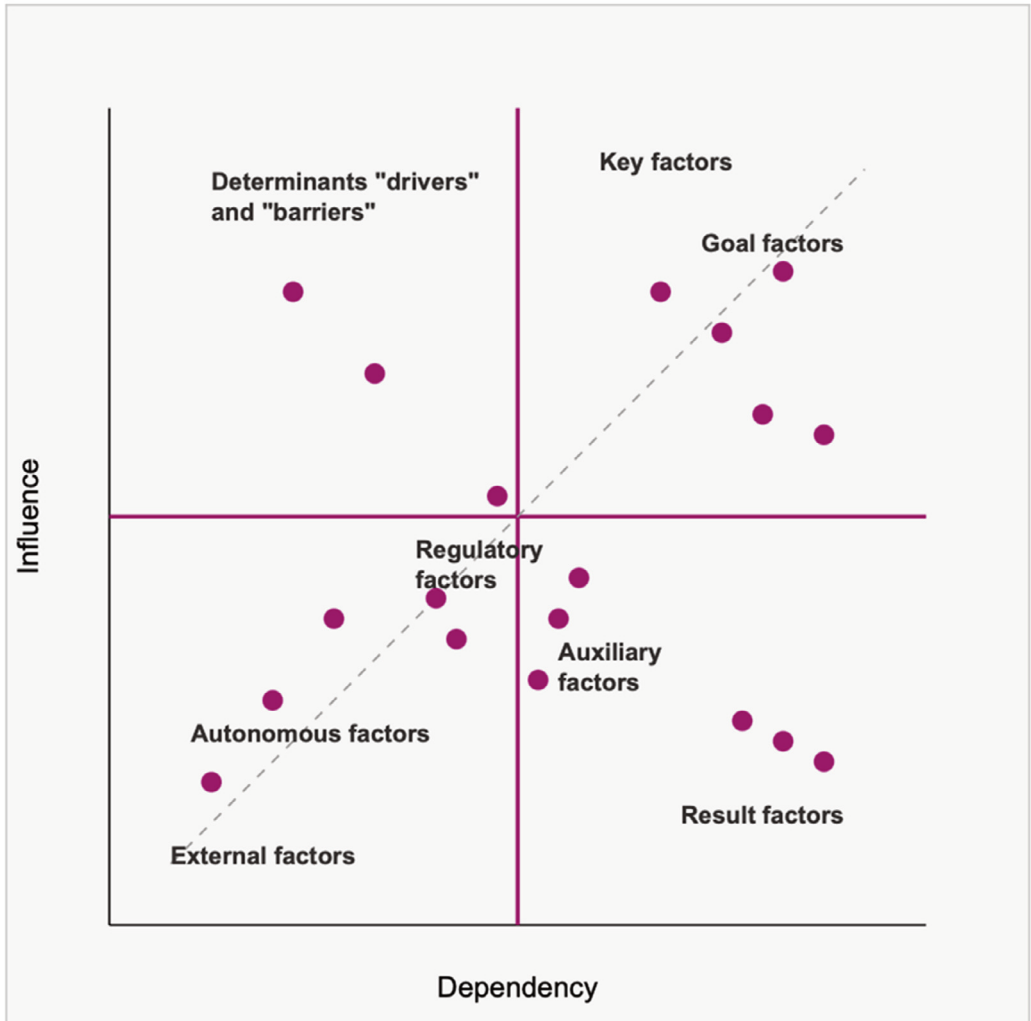


Figure 1. The arrangement of factors influencing a research area: an example output of structural analysis.

Source: based on figure in Nazarko et al. (2011, p. 16).

The use of structural analysis in the research process followed an established procedure, which is graphically presented in Figure 2.

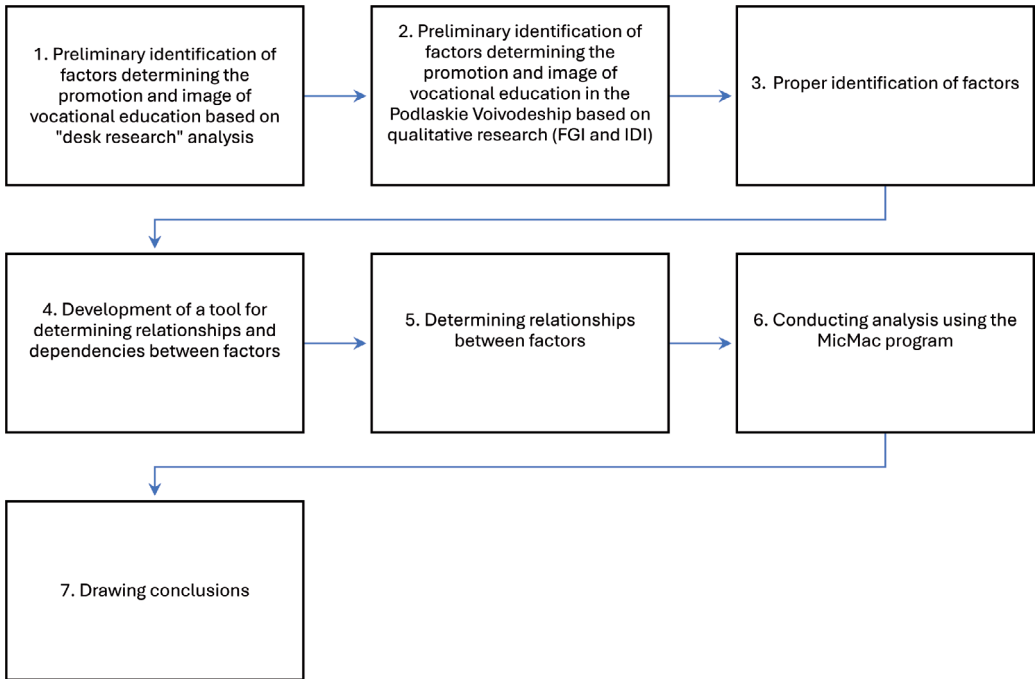


Figure 2. The research procedure for structural analysis.

An important step in structural analysis is to identify factors that genuinely determine the phenomenon under investigation. In the first phase, a “desk research” analysis was conducted (Figure 2), involving a critical review of the literature on educational marketing and studies on vocational education (at both national and regional levels). Based on this review, an initial list of factors was created. This list was subsequently refined based on expert suggestions gathered during the FGI (Focus Group Interview) process. For the purposes of this study, experts were defined as representatives of organizations and institutions with unquestionable knowledge in vocational education, as well as practitioners and researchers specializing in the studied area. As a result, a comprehensive list of factors was drawn up (Table 1), which served as a tool for determining relationships and interdependencies among the identified factors.

Table 1. Factors determining the image and promotional activity of vocational schools in the Podlaskie Voivodeship.

No	Factor	Acronym
1	employment needs of employers	ENE
2	systemic solutions within vocational education in Poland	SSV
3	demographic situation	DS
4	competition in the education market	CEM
5	level of economic development in the region	EDR
6	the recruitment system for vocational schools	RS
7	generational attitudes of youth (students)	YA
8	parents' attitudes (especially mothers') toward vocational education	PA
9	development of new technologies, including AI	DNT
10	development of social media	DSM
11	initiative-taking capacity of vocational schools	ITC
12	strength of the relationship between vocational schools and employers	RVE
13	strength of the relationship between vocational schools and local governments	RVG
14	mission and values of vocational schools	MV
15	awareness of vocational schools' promotional needs	APN
16	strength of the relationship between vocational schools and alumni	RVA

The arrangement of factors influencing the analyzed research area was developed using a **structural analysis matrix** (Table 2). In this matrix, 10 experts evaluated the impact of the individual factors on one another on a scale from 0 to 3, where:

- 0 indicated no influence,
- 1 indicated weak influence,
- 2 indicated moderate influence, and
- 3 indicated strong influence.

Their assessments provided the foundation for building the structural analysis matrix presented below. All factors were next analyzed to explore their relationships and interconnections, which collectively define the system.

Table 2. Degree of mutual influence among factors determining the image and promotion of vocational education in the Podlaskie Voivodeship – expert evaluations.

	ENE	SSV	DS	CEM	EDR	RS	YA	PA	DNT	DSM	ITC	RVE	RVG	MV	APN	RVA
ENE	0	3	0	2	2	2	3	1	2	2	2	3	2	2	3	2
SSV	1	0	0	2	2	2	1	2	2	1	2	3	3	2	2	1
DS	3	2	0	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	1
CEM	3	2	0	0	2	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	2
EDR	3	2	2	2	0	2	2	2	3	1	2	3	2	2	2	1
RS	2	1	0	3	2	0	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	3	1
YA	2	1	1	3	2	2	0	2	2	3	3	2	1	3	3	2
PA	1	1	2	2	1	1	2	0	0	2	2	1	1	2	3	0
DNT	3	1	0	3	2	1	2	0	0	3	2	1	1	2	2	1
DSM	1	1	0	2	1	0	3	2	2	0	2	2	1	2	3	2
ITC	1	1	0	3	2	1	3	2	1	2	0	3	2	3	3	3
RVE	3	1	0	3	2	1	2	2	1	2	3	0	2	3	3	2
RVG	1	1	0	2	2	1	1	1	0	0	2	1	0	1	2	1
MV	1	0	0	2	1	1	2	2	0	2	3	3	2	0	2	2
APN	2	1	0	3	2	0	3	2	1	3	3	3	2	3	0	3
RVA	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	2	0	1	1	1	1	2	2	0

The experts participating in the study identified 214 relationships among the factors (variables), indicating 42 instances of zero, which represented a lack of relationship between variables. Weak relationships (rated as 1) were identified 58 times, while 106 instances were rated as moderate (2). Strong relationships (3) between variables occurred in 50 cases. Non-zero values were recorded in 84% of the fields in the matrix (Table 3).

Table 3. Characteristics of the direct influence matrix.

Indicator	Value
Matrix Dimensions	16 × 16
Number of zeros (no influence)	42
Number of ones (weak influence)	58
Number of twos (moderate influence)	106
Number of threes (strong influence)	50
Degree of fill	84%

4. Analysis of research results

Analyzing the summary results of calculations regarding the strengths and direct dependencies (Table 4) revealed the following trends:

- The factors exerting a strong direct influence on others were as follows: competition in the education market (CEM), generational attitudes of youth (students) (YA) level of economic development in the region (EDR), awareness of vocational schools' promotional needs (APN), the strength of the relationship between vocational schools and employers (RVE) the initiative-taking capacity of vocational schools (ability to undertake initiatives) (ITC).
- The factors most dependent on others were as follows: awareness of vocational schools' promotional needs (APN), competition in the education market (CEM), the initiative-taking capacity of vocational schools (ITC), the mission and values of vocational schools (MV), the strength of the relationship between vocational schools and employers (RVE).
- The factor with the least dependency on others was the demographic situation (DS). Other factors with relatively low dependency include: the recruitment system for vocational schools (RS), systemic solutions within vocational education in Poland (SSV), and the development of new technologies, including AI (DNT).

Table 4. Summary of direct influence strengths between factors in structural analysis.

No	Acronym	Factor	Total influence strength	Total dependency strength
1	ENE	employment needs of employers	31	27
2	SSV	systemic solutions within vocational education in Poland	26	18
3	DS	demographic situation	28	5
4	CEM	competition in the education market	35	36
5	EDR	level of economic development in the region	31	25
6	RS	the recruitment system for vocational schools	24	18
7	YA	generational attitudes of youth (students)	32	31
8	PA	parents' attitudes (especially mothers') toward vocational education	21	25
9	DNT	development of new technologies, including AI	24	18
10	DSM	development of social media	24	27
11	ITC	initiative-taking capacity of vocational schools	30	34
12	RVE	strength of the relationship between vocational schools and employers	30	33
13	RVG	strength of the relationship between vocational schools and local governments	16	27
14	MV	mission and values of vocational schools	23	34
15	APN	awareness of vocational schools' promotional needs	31	38
16	RVA	Strength of the relationship between vocational schools and alumni	14	24

Based on the above, a graph was created using the Mic-Mac software, illustrating the strong direct influences of factors within the established system (Figure 3). Analysis of the graph reveals that the factors exhibiting the strongest connections are: awareness of vocational schools' promotional needs (APN), strength of the relationship between vocational schools and employers (RVE), the initiative-taking capacity of vocational schools (ITC), competition in the education market (CEM), the generational attitudes of youth (students) (YA), and the employment needs of employers (ENE).

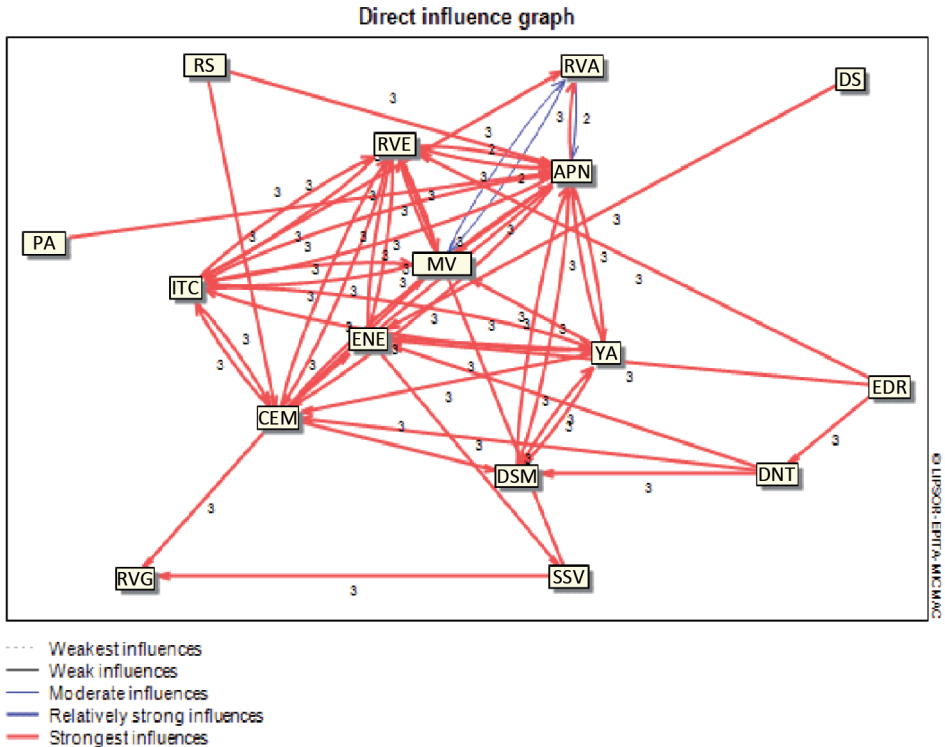


Figure 3. Graph of direct interactions.
(drawn up in Mic-Mac)

Based on the graph of direct interactions, strong connections can be observed between the following factors:

- The strength of the relationship between vocational schools and employers (RVE) and the employment needs of employers (ENE);
- Competition in the education market (CEM) and the initiative-taking capacity of vocational schools (ITC);
- Awareness of vocational schools' promotional needs (APN) and the development of social media (DSM);
- The initiative-taking capacity of vocational schools (ITC) and the strength of the relationship between vocational schools and employers (RVE);
- The strength of the relationship between vocational schools and employers (RVE) and the mission and values of vocational schools (MV);
- The initiative-taking capacity of vocational schools (ITC) and the strength of the relationship between vocational schools and alumni (RVA).

The observed interactions underscore the need for vocational schools to adopt a pragmatic approach to promotion, which also includes a rational dimension aimed at increasing recruitment and enhancing school recognition. Relationships with employers are likely to intensify, especially in cases where there is a heightened demand for education in specific fields or professions. The strong competition emerging among schools necessitates greater efforts to attract students, which in turn strengthens the need for closer relationships with employers. Vocational schools that demonstrate initiative are also more likely to reinforce relationships with alumni, who, as stakeholders, can disseminate positive opinions about the school and share their favorable educational experiences. The analysis performed in Mic-Mac further confirms that employers influence the shaping of a school’s mission and values. This is logical, as they form the core and foundation of vocational education. The identity of a vocational school is built on its relationships with employers, who play a pivotal role in defining the school’s direction and priorities.

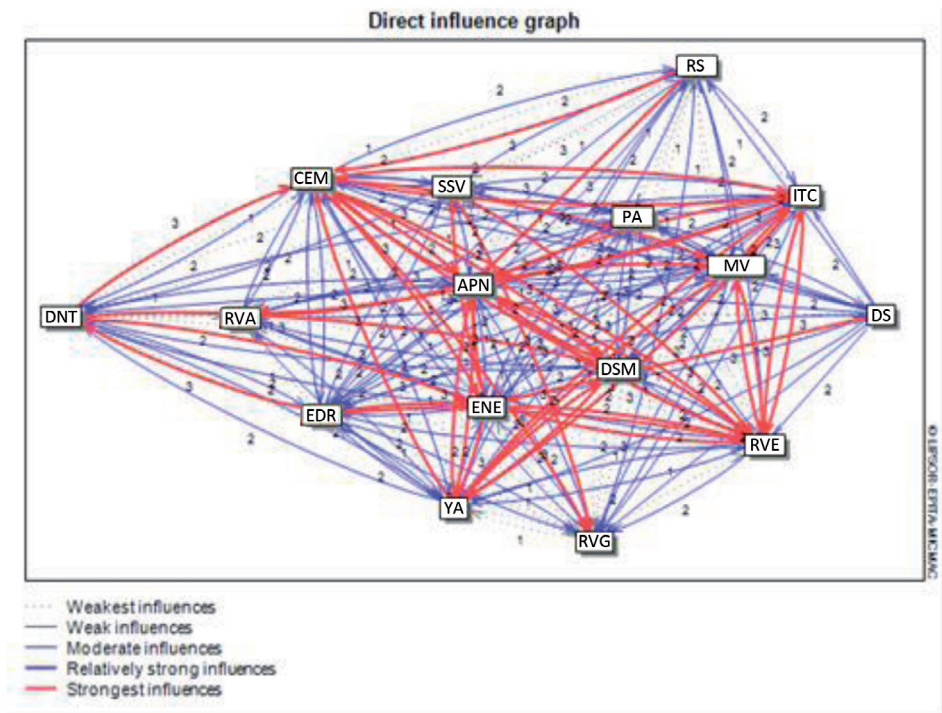


Figure 4. Network of direct interactions among factors determining the promotion and image of vocational education in the Podlaskie Voivodeship. (drawn up in Mic-Mac)

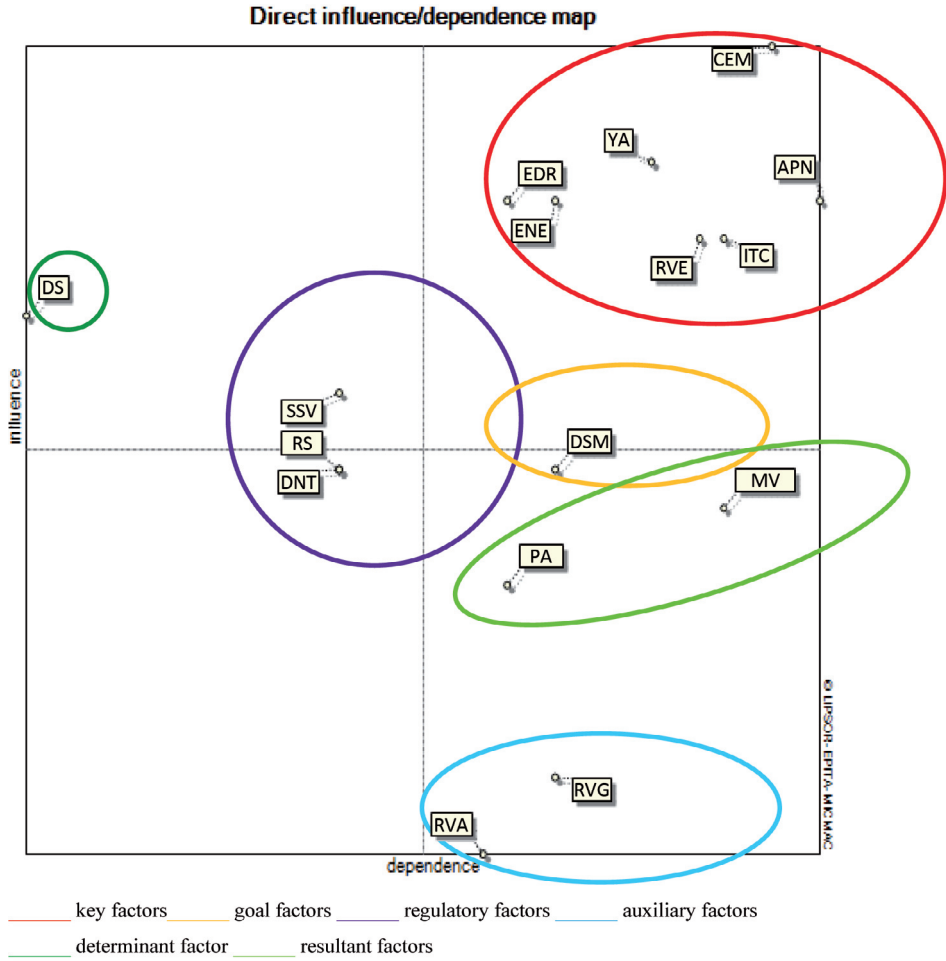
Moreover, the performed in Mic-Mac demonstrates that the shaping of the image and promotion of vocational education is influenced by multiple factors, among which numerous interactions can be observed (Figure 4). This confirms that promotional activities and image-building efforts for vocational schools require consideration of a broad context. This involves focusing on the internal potential of the school while simultaneously leveraging relationships established with external stakeholders, primarily employers but also alumni. The analysis also highlights the strategic dimension of vocational education promotion, emphasizing the importance of integrating internal strengths with external collaborations to achieve long-term goals and enhance the school's competitive position.

Key factors combine a strong influence with a high level of dependency (Nazarko et al., 2011). In the context of promoting vocational education, several key factors can be identified, which can be categorized into external and internal factors. The *Key External Factors* are competition in the education market (CEM), generational attitudes of youth (students) (YA), employment needs of employers (ENE), the level of economic development in the region (EDR). The *Key Internal Factors*, in turn, are awareness of vocational schools' promotional needs (APN), initiative-taking capacity of vocational schools (ITC), strength of relationships between vocational schools and employers (RVE). This demonstrates that a school's activities aimed at attracting new students and solidifying its desired image among stakeholders require addressing multiple perspectives, which poses certain challenges.

The effectiveness of vocational education promotion is influenced by the economic development of the region, which drives the growth of enterprises that express demand for specific professions. Economic development enhances the perception of vocational education among key stakeholder groups, thereby strengthening its position within the socio-economic environment.

While external factors play a significant role, internal factors are equally crucial. Vocational schools must consistently demonstrate initiative and maintain an awareness of their promotional needs, regardless of external circumstances. The effectiveness of their promotional activities heavily depends on the strength of their relationships with employers, who form the core of the school's relational capital.

The promotional activities of vocational schools, much like those of commercial entities, are grounded in knowledge about their target audience. Therefore, understanding the generational attitudes of youth is vital for shaping effective promotional strategies and achieving success in a competitive educational landscape.



(drawn up in Mic-Mac)

Figure 5. Map of structural analysis factors based on direct interactions.
(drawn up in Mic-Mac)

Goal factors are those that are more influenced by other factors than they influence the remaining ones; they represent potential objectives within the studied system. In the system of factors determining the promotion and image of vocational education, the factor “development of social media” (DSM) was found to serve this role. As a phenomenon within the broader sphere of communication, the development of social media is subject to continuous evolution. A noticeable trend is the segmentation of these media based on generational needs. Communication within the educational sector must account for changes occurring in social media; however, it is not a determinant of their development.

This underscores the adaptive role vocational schools must play, aligning their communication strategies with the evolving nature of social media to effectively reach their target audiences.

Dependent/resultant factors are characterized by low influence and high dependency on other factors. They are particularly susceptible to changes driven by decisive and key factors. The following have been identified as resultant factors: parents' attitudes (especially mothers') toward vocational education (PA) and mission and values of vocational schools (MV). The analysis indicates that parents' attitudes toward vocational schools are a result of interdependencies among key factors. The desired behavior of parents, who often co-decide on their child's educational path, will be influenced, among other things, by the economic situation, including labor market conditions, and by the initiative of the school in actively seeking their attention. Vocational schools should clearly communicate their mission and values, ensuring they align with changes in the socio-economic environment of the school. A failure to define an attractive and coherent value system, relevant from the perspective of various stakeholder groups, including current and potential students, diminishes the credibility of promotional efforts and weakens the image of the educational institution.

Decisive factors (determinants) are those that exert a very strong influence on the system, acting as either "drivers" or "barriers," but are difficult to control. The map of direct interactions (Chart 3) indicates that in the system of factors, the demographic situation (DS) factor has been found to fulfil this role. The state of vocational education depends significantly on demographic trends. Unfavorable tendencies in this area amplify the role of promotion as a tool to support recruitment processes and increase competition among vocational schools. They also emphasize the need to focus on image-building and creating a distinctive educational offering.

Regulatory/auxiliary factors are characterized by a low level of influence on the system but can be helpful in achieving strategic goals. In the analyzed system, these include: systemic solutions within vocational education in Poland (SSV), the recruitment system for vocational schools (RS), the development of new technologies, including AI (DNT). Vocational schools operate within frameworks that are often imposed from above, such as recruitment systems and regulations derived from the structure of vocational education in Poland. These factors significantly shape the activities of vocational schools, including their promotional efforts. The development of new technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) plays a dual role within the system. On the one hand, it can contribute to creating more engaging and attractive communication strategies. On the other hand, it serves as a distinguishing feature for schools, showcasing their commitment to innovation and modernity.

Resultant factors are characterized by low influence and high dependency on other factors, making them particularly susceptible to changes driven by decisive and key factors. Within the system of factors determining the promotion and image of vocational education, the identified resultant factors include: parents' attitudes (especially mothers') toward vocational education (PA), mission and values of vocational schools (MV). The first determinant – parents' attitudes, particularly mothers' – indicates that parental decisions may stem from the general labor market situation and an evaluation of vocational education as a component of the broader Polish educational system. The mission and values of vocational schools should remain current and comprehensible for all stakeholder groups. They must also reflect transformations in generational attitudes among young people to maintain relevance.

Note that no *autonomous factors* – those with the least influence on and from other factors – were identified within the system. This absence confirms the high level of dynamism and the complexity of interactions among the determinants in the system. This dynamic nature underscores the interconnectedness and interdependence of factors shaping the promotion and image of vocational education.

5. Conclusions

The structural analysis identified six types of factors determining the promotion and image of vocational education (Figure 3):

1. Key Factors:

- Competition in the education market (CEM);
- Generational attitudes of youth (students) (YA);
- Awareness of vocational schools' promotional needs (APN);
- Initiative-taking capacity of vocational schools (ITC);
- Strength of the relationship between vocational schools and employers (RVE);
- Employment needs of employers (ENE);
- Level of economic development in the region (EDR).

The dominance of these variables underscores the necessity of proactive strategies that align vocational education offerings with labor market requirements while enhancing stakeholder relationships and promotional activities.

2. Goal Factor:

- Development of social media (DSM).

Social media platforms have become integral to communication with students, parents, and employers, providing vocational schools with tools to engage stakeholders effectively.

However, success depends on the ability to adapt communication strategies to evolving trends and generational preferences.

3. Resultant Factors:

- Parents' attitudes (especially mothers') toward vocational education (PA);
- Mission and values of vocational schools (MV).

Positive parental perceptions and well-defined institutional missions are critical for building credibility and trust. Vocational schools must ensure their values align with stakeholder expectations and labor market demands to improve their image and appeal.

4. Regulatory Factors:

- Systemic solutions within vocational education in Poland (SSV);
- The recruitment system for vocational schools (RS);
- Development of new technologies, including AI (DNT).

While these factors offer limited direct influence, they provide essential conditions for growth and innovation. Strategic use of technology, particularly AI, can differentiate schools and enhance the attractiveness of vocational education.

5. Auxiliary Factors:

- Strength of the relationship between vocational schools and alumni (RVA);
- Strength of the relationship between vocational schools and local governments (RVG).

Alumni networks can serve as ambassadors, promoting the school's reputation, while cooperation with local governments ensures alignment with regional development strategies and resource access.

6. Determinant Factor:

- Demographic situation (DS).

Declining student populations increase competition among schools, intensifying the need for effective promotion and image-building strategies to attract candidates and address workforce gaps.

This categorization highlights the dynamic and multifaceted nature of the factors shaping the promotion and image of vocational education. Each category plays a distinct role, ranging from driving strategic actions to supporting and regulating efforts within the system. This highlights the necessity of implementing a strategic approach in promotional efforts rather than focusing solely on previously adopted activities. The interdependencies within the system are highly dynamic, emphasizing that schools, like businesses, should conduct in-depth analyses of their environment. In the constructed

system, a greater number of factors determining vocational schools' promotion are external.

The reliance on expert evaluations ensured that the findings are grounded in practical and professional perspectives, offering valuable insights for both policymakers and vocational education practitioners.

Key recommendations emerging from these findings are as follows:

- Vocational schools need to strengthen their relational capital. This involves enhancing their expertise in building relationships not only with students but also with employers and local governments.
- The initiative-taking capacity of vocational schools has a significant impact on other factors, indicating its pivotal role. Schools should begin by consciously defining and then clearly communicating their values, as these can positively shape their image and distinguish them from competitors.
- The process of building the mission of a vocational school, grounded in these values, should involve active participation from representatives of employers and local governments who collaborate with vocational schools. This approach ensures alignment with stakeholder expectations and reinforces the school's role within its community.

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