



## Building and brand recognition of veterinary clinics in Slovenia

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**Abstract:** Purpose of the article - The article examines brand development and recognition among veterinary clinics in Slovenia. It understands the veterinary clinic brand not merely as a visual or promotional element, but as the result of professional quality, trust, communication, user experience, and digital presence.

**Research methodology** - The study combines a literature review with a qualitative approach. The empirical component comprises nine semi-structured interviews with owners of private veterinary clinics across Slovenia. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

**Findings** - Veterinary clinic owners associate brand development with professional work, treatment quality, operational consistency, clear communication, and user experience. Recognition is linked to local presence, recommendations, professional reputation, a clear clinic identity, and digital visibility. Trust connects brand and recognition, while digital presence supports first contact, accessibility, and perceived credibility.

**Keywords:** veterinary clinics, brand, brand recognition, communication, user experience, digital presence

**JEL classification:** M31, L84, O33

## Gradnja in prepoznavanje znamke veterinarskih klinik v Sloveniji

**Povzetek:** Namen članka - Članek proučuje razvoj blagovne znamke in prepoznavnost veterinarskih klinik v Sloveniji. Blagovno znamko veterinarske klinike obravnava ne le kot vizualni ali promocijski element, temveč kot rezultat strokovne kakovosti, zaupanja, komunikacije, uporabniške izkušnje in digitalne prisotnosti.

**Metodologija raziskave** - Raziskava združuje pregled literature in kvalitativni raziskovalni pristop. Empirični del obsega devet polstrukturiranih intervjujev z lastniki zasebnih veterinarskih klinik po Sloveniji. Podatki so bili analizirani z uporabo refleksivne tematske analize.

**Ugotovitve** - Lastniki veterinarskih klinik razvoj blagovne znamke povezujejo s strokovnim delom, kakovostjo obravnave, doslednostjo poslovanja, jasno komunikacijo in uporabniško izkušnjo. Prepoznavnost povezujejo z lokalno prisotnostjo, priporočili, strokovnim ugledom, jasno identiteto klinike in digitalno vidnostjo. Zaupanje predstavlja povezovalni element med blagovno znamko in prepoznavnostjo, medtem ko digitalna prisotnost podpira prvi stik s strankami, dostopnost in zaznano verodostojnost.

**Ključne besede:** veterinarske klinike, blagovna znamka, prepoznavnost blagovne znamke, komunikacija, uporabniška izkušnja, digitalna prisotnost

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

In the modern service environment, a brand is no longer understood only as a name, logo, or visual image of an organisation, but as a broader set of meanings, experiences, and expectations through which users recognise, evaluate, and distinguish a provider from others. This understanding is particularly important in service settings, where users often cannot fully assess service quality before direct contact with the provider. Therefore, trust, brand image, communication consistency, service delivery, and overall user experience play a central role in shaping users' perceptions. Contemporary literature consequently treats the brand as a strategic relational asset that supports value creation, consumer loyalty, and long-term relationships with users, rather than merely as a promotional or aesthetic category (Vukasović & Junc, 2019; Pareek & Harrison, 2020; Kumar et al., 2024; Vukasović & Jagodič, 2025).

Such a shift in understanding the brand is particularly important in contexts where the service is closely linked to high professionalism, responsibility, and a distinct relational dimension. Veterinary activity represents such a context. It encompasses medical treatment, ethical responsibility, professional decision-making, and everyday communication with an animal's owner, who, in addition to being the chooser and the financial provider of the service, is the one who experiences, interprets, and evaluates that service. Therefore, when choosing a veterinary clinic, users generally assess not only professional competence but also the clarity of explanations, a sense of safety, accessibility, responsiveness, staff attitude, and the overall impression the clinic creates upon first encounter. This is why it makes sense to understand the brand in the veterinary environment more broadly: as a result of professional quality, communication practices, the experience of users, and the trust that is built over time between the clinic and its clients (Pun, 2020; Liang, 2022; Kumar et al., 2024).

The importance of communication and trust is particularly pronounced in the veterinary profession, as pet owners often make decisions under conditions of uncertainty, emotional involvement, and limited professional knowledge. In such situations, it is not only what the clinic does professionally that is decisive, but also how it explains it, how it guides the user through the process, and the extent to which it inspires confidence in professional reliability and respectful treatment. Research in veterinary communication confirms that quality communication is not only an accompaniment to clinical practice but also significantly affects understanding of recommendations, cooperation with animal owners, and overall satisfaction. Broader research in the field of services and healthcare branding further shows that perceived quality, satisfaction, and trust are closely related to brand image and user loyalty (Pun, 2020; Liang, 2022; Kumar et al., 2024).

Today, a veterinary clinic's brand is shaped not only through direct contact with clients but also through digital environments. The website, social media presence, online reviews, recommendations, and other digital touchpoints increasingly influence the clinic's accessibility, reputation, and wider public perception. Users often encounter the clinic before visiting, most often through a search engine, a website, or referrals from other users online. This is why digital presence is not only about the web but also about the broader field of digital communication and client relationship management. Digital channels allow organisations to reach a broader audience, receive quicker feedback, target groups more precisely, and communicate in greater detail. However, their effectiveness depends on alignment with the organisation's strategic orientation and on the service quality delivered by the organisation (Jagodič, 2021; Jagodič & Milfelner, 2022; Jagodič et al., 2025). Therefore, the latest research indicates that digital infrastructure, electronic recommendations, and digital marketing capabilities substantially influence brand identity development, and that, in the veterinary field, a positive relationship between digital presence and brand performance is also observed (Fejzić et al., 2023; Shams et al., 2024). Digital presence is thus no longer just a supplementary communication channel but an important part of the organisation's overall perception.

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Nevertheless, the issue of brand development and recognition among veterinary clinics in Slovenia remains relatively under-researched. Although the existing literature indicates that a brand in service activities is co-created by professional quality, communication, trust, user experience and digital presence, it is not sufficiently clear how owners of veterinary clinics in Slovenia understand these factors and which they recognise as key to building their clinic's recognition. This is precisely the starting point of this paper. The purpose of the research is therefore to examine how owners of veterinary clinics in Slovenia understand the development and recognition of their clinics' brands, and to what extent they attribute roles to trust, communication, user experience, and digital presence in this process. The contribution of the research lies in connecting insights from the fields of service marketing, health branding, veterinary communication and digital presence in the specific Slovenian context. Such an approach can contribute both to a better theoretical understanding of the phenomenon under consideration and to more thoughtful and strategic operation of veterinary clinics in practice (Pun, 2020; Fejzić et al., 2023; Shams et al., 2024; Vukasović & Jagodič, 2025).

## **2 THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF BRANDING AND RECOGNITION IN VETERINARY MEDICINE**

### **2.1 Brand, identity and brand image**

In modern marketing, a brand can no longer be understood solely as a recognisable name, sign, or visual marker, as that definition captures only its outermost layer. A brand is a broader, more complex phenomenon that encompasses a system of meanings, values, expectations, and experiences through which users perceive, evaluate, and distinguish an organisation from other providers. It is a dynamic construct that does not exist solely in the organisation's intentions. Rather, it is formed by the relationship between what the organisation communicates about itself and how users experience it. This is precisely why modern literature treats the brand as a key strategic element of an organisation, as it is associated not only with recognition but also with trust, perceived quality, and long-term relationships with users (Pareek & Harrison, 2020; Vukasović & Jagodič, 2025).

To understand a brand, it is particularly important to distinguish between identity and brand image. Brand identity originates within the organisation and encompasses the elements through which it expresses its nature, values, professional orientation, and promise to users. It is therefore the brand's internal starting point, the way the organisation wants to be understood and recognised. Brand image, by contrast, is formed by users and the public and results from their interpretation of all interactions with the organisation. This interpretation is based not only on formal communication or visual images, but also on experiences, recommendations, digital traces, employee behaviour, and service quality. Therefore, there is no automatic correspondence between identity and image. An organisation can cultivate a particular identity, but its actual image is formed only through practice and user perception.

In service industries, this difference is even more pronounced than in product brands. Because the service is intangible, often more difficult to compare and not fully verifiable in advance, the user does not judge the brand solely by its communication messages but primarily by the service experience. In a service environment, a brand is established and maintained through the quality of interactions, process organisation, response speed, employee attitudes, clarity of communication, and the overall sense of trustworthiness the organisation conveys. Hence, it is not possible to define a brand solely by visual identity; rather, a brand is a holistic, experiential, and relational combination across all aspects. In this context, an organisation is required to ensure that, in addition to the brand identity being clear, it is implemented consistently across all everyday tasks. Any discrepancies between the company's promises and the end consumer experience quickly erode the brand's trustworthiness. In this sense, a brand is less a static label and more a process of establishing

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coherence between what the organisation seeks to represent and what the user recognises as its essence (Pareek & Harrison, 2020; Shams et al., 2024).

## 2.2 Brand recognition in service industries

Brand recognition in service contexts means more than the user simply knowing or recalling the provider's name. In a narrow sense, it encompasses the brand's visibility and recall. More broadly, for services, it means the brand occupies a distinct, understandable, and substantively defined place in the user's mind. A recognisable brand is not only noticed but also semantically positioned: the user associates it with certain characteristics, values, a way of working, or a specific quality. Recognition is therefore closely linked to differentiation. An organisation is not truly recognisable because it is present, but because the user can place it among others and associate it with something concrete (Berry, 2000; Vukasović & Junc, 2019).

In the service environment, such recognition is shaped not only by advertising and visual consistency but also by a broader range of communication, relational, and experiential factors. Since services are generally not tangible in advance, users rely on indirect signals to form their judgments. These include the method of communication, the accessibility of information, the professionalism of presentation, recommendations from other users, the consistency of service, and the quality of direct contact with the organisation. Recognition is therefore the result of repeated confirmation of the same identity elements across different points of contact. Only when the user perceives a recurring pattern across these contacts does a clearer image of the brand form in their consciousness (Berry, 2000; Pareek & Harrison, 2020).

The digital environment has further strengthened and transformed the importance of visibility in service activities. Today, the first contact with an organisation is often digital: it begins with a search engine, a website, a social media profile, or an online rating or recommendation from another user. This means that visibility is formed even before direct contact with the service. Hence, a company's website or digital footprint influences not only its market recognition but also its perceived trustworthiness, professionalism, appearance, and applicability. In the case of services, where the service level cannot be determined in advance, online reviews and other electronic endorsements play a significant role by mitigating information asymmetry and shaping consumers' decisions. At the same time, digital channels enable organisations to communicate more effectively and interactively. Nonetheless, their effectiveness is tied not only to a technical presence but also to engaging content, message consistency, and alignment of the digital image with the actual service experience (Jagodič, 2021; Jagodič & Milfelner, 2022; Pocchiari et al., 2025). Hence, in the service sector, it is appropriate to understand brand recognition as the result of a combination of communication, experience, recommendations, reputation, and digital presence rather than promotional exposure alone (Shams et al., 2024; Pocchiari et al., 2025).

Such an understanding is also important because it highlights the difference between mere visibility and actual recognition. An organisation can be highly visible in the public space yet not occupy a clear place in users' minds. Conversely, an organisation that does not advertise heavily may become known to users mainly through its association with a particular way of working, reliability, or quality of service. Service organisations therefore face a central question not only of how to be visible, but above all of how to be understood and remembered in a manner consistent with their brand identity.

## 2.3 Trust, reputation and perceived quality

When we place the discussion of branding within professional, relationship, and health-related services, trust, reputation, and perceived quality come to the fore; these elements are not merely by-products of successful branding but often constitute its substantive core. In such contexts, the user generally judges the organisation not only by what it promises,

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but primarily by whether it acts professionally, clearly, consistently and responsibly. Trust is a key mechanism for reducing uncertainty. When the user cannot fully evaluate the service before using it, or when it carries greater emotional, financial, or health weight, trust becomes a central factor in their judgment.

In this context, perceived quality encompasses not only the technical or professional correctness of the service but also the user's experience of the entire service process. It includes the clarity of explanations, a sense of security, a respectful attitude, consistent treatment, responsiveness, and the overall experience of contact with the organisation. Research in the healthcare environment shows that perceived quality significantly influences users' brand image and behavioural intentions, with trust and satisfaction playing an important mediating role. A positive experience does not automatically lead to long-term attachment; it becomes strategically important only when it strengthens the organisation's sense of reliability and credibility (Liang, 2022; Kumar et al., 2024).

Reputation in this context is a broader and more stable phenomenon than a single brand image. While an image can shift more quickly through individual communication activities or experiences, a reputation is formed gradually and, as a rule, reflects a more solid social judgement of the organisation's professionalism, credibility and quality. Reputation is built not only through direct contact with the user but also through recommendations, public discourse, digital reviews, and the organisation's broader presence in the environment. In service activities with a high level of user involvement, reputation carries even greater weight, as it serves as a guide to choice. Often, the user is not only choosing among different services but also among the levels of trust each provider may arouse in them (Barnett et al., 2006; Walsh & Beatty, 2007; Pocchiari et al., 2025).

Trust, perceived quality and reputation are closely linked. Perceived quality strengthens trust, repeated positive experiences strengthen reputation, and together they gradually strengthen the organisation's brand. It is in such activities that it becomes clear that a brand is not something the organisation "has" but something that is acquired and confirmed over the long term through consistent practice. This is especially important for activities in which the user seeks not only a service but also a sense of security, professional support, and a predictable quality of the relationship (Walsh & Beatty, 2007; Kumar et al., 2024).

## **2.4 Peculiarities of branding veterinary clinics**

Veterinary clinics are a specific example of service organisations in which health services, professional authority, ethical responsibility, and strong emotional involvement among users are intertwined. A distinctive feature of veterinary activity is that the patient does not choose or evaluate the service; rather, the animal owner assumes this role. The service is sought, selected, financed, experienced, and subsequently evaluated. As a result, the brand of a veterinary clinic is formed not only through the professional treatment of animals, but also through the quality of communication with the owner, the way decisions are explained, empathy, accessibility, work organisation, and the overall impression the clinic creates throughout the treatment process. In such an environment, the professional and relational dimensions of the service are inextricably linked (Shaw et al., 2004; Pun, 2020; Janke et al., 2021).

When branding veterinary practices, communication is an essential part of professional service, not merely an accompanying element. Pet owners often make decisions in uncertain, emotionally stressful situations, so clarity of explanation, respect, empathy, and transparent behaviour become important factors in perceived quality. Research in veterinary communication confirms that the quality of communication affects client participation, understanding of recommendations, decision-making, and overall satisfaction with treatment. More recent discussions define it as one of the key competencies of modern veterinary practice (Pun, 2020; Kleinsorgen & Artemiou, 2025). For this reason, the brand of a veterinary practice is created at the intersection of professional credibility and relationship quality.

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Another distinctive feature of veterinary clinics is that their brand is shaped not only by direct contact but also by digital channels. Direct experience in the clinic remains fundamental, encompassing contact with staff, the organisation of work, attitudes towards animals, and the overall atmosphere during the visit. However, perceptions of the clinic today begin to form much earlier. The website, basic information about services, the accessibility of contact details, presence on social networks, online reviews, and recommendations from other users influence whether the clinic is perceived as modern, professional, accessible, and trustworthy. A survey of veterinary practices in Bosnia and Herzegovina showed a positive correlation between digital presence and business performance, indicating that digital presence in the veterinary industry is no longer a peripheral support function but an important part of broader visibility and competitiveness (Fejzić et al., 2023).

It is important to emphasise that a veterinary clinic's digital presence is not limited to external visibility but is also connected to broader processes of digitalisation in communication and work organisation. Timeliness of information, transparency of services, responsiveness on digital channels, management of online ratings, and consistency of communication require a certain level of internal organisation, digital competencies, and strategic thinking. Research in digital marketing and ICT support in service environments warns that digital tools create greater value only when integrated into the broader logic of market orientation, service quality, and customer relationship management (Jagodič, 2021; Jagodič & Milfelner, 2022; Jagodič et al., 2025). For veterinary clinics, this means that an effective digital presence is best understood primarily as an extension of professional credibility, clear communication, and a holistic user experience, rather than as a separate or independent dimension of branding.

However, a digital presence in veterinary practice cannot replace the quality of service. Its primary function is to make a strong first impression, reduce uncertainty, and facilitate the first connection between the clinic and the user. If the online picture shows a professional, neat, and friendly clinic, but the experience does not match these promises, a gap between expectations and reality will soon develop. For this reason, branding in veterinary clinics involves integrating multiple levels that must work together: professional quality, communication competence, user experience, local reputation, and a well-thought-out digital presence. Only in this mutual coherence can we talk about a strong, credible brand for a veterinary clinic.

It follows that it makes sense to understand the veterinary practice brand as a multidimensional, highly relational and contextual phenomenon. It is not formed primarily through formal marketing activities, but rather through the consistent fulfilment of professional, communication and ethical promises in everyday practice. The connection between identity, recognition, trust, perceived quality, reputation and digital visibility therefore represents the central theoretical starting point for further empirical consideration of veterinary practices in Slovenia (Pun, 2020; Fejzić et al., 2023; Vukasović & Jagodič, 2025; Kleinsorgen & Artemiou, 2025).

### **3 SLOVENIAN CONTEXT OF VETERINARY CLINICS**

#### **3.1 Activity characteristics**

Veterinary practice in Slovenia operates within a highly specific institutional environment, as it is a regulated, professionally demanding service activity (SPOT, n.d.-b), which also significantly shapes how an individual clinic's brand and recognition are formed. It is not merely a market service activity but an area directly related to the protection of animal health and life, disease prevention, the promotion of animal welfare, and, to a certain extent, public health. For this reason, veterinary clinics do not act only as service providers but as organisations whose operations are constantly intertwined with professional responsibility, regulatory requirements, and the broader public interest. It is precisely this dual nature of the activity that is important for understanding the Slovenian context, as it

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affects both user expectations and the criteria by which users judge the credibility and quality of an individual clinic.

Entry into the veterinary activity in Slovenia is regulated. According to information from the SPOT portal (n.d.-d), veterinary activities within veterinary organisations may be performed independently only by a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine holding a valid licence. The veterinary organisation must also meet prescribed personnel, spatial, and technical conditions to perform the activity and possess equipment, which is checked during the verification process (SPOT, n.d.-c). This means that professional qualifications are a basic condition for entering the market from the outset, not an element that would differentiate clinics only later. In the Slovenian veterinary environment, professionalism is understood as a minimum standard for legitimate operation. At the same time, differentiation between providers begins to take shape in the breadth of services, the quality of the user experience, responsiveness, communication, and the general organisation of work.

An important characteristic of the Slovenian veterinary space is its internal organisational diversity. The verification system accommodates several organisational forms, from clinics to other veterinary structures, indicating that the veterinary sector is not uniform but differentiated in its content and functions. In addition, part of the activity is carried out within the framework of the public veterinary service, for which the organisation must obtain a UVHVVR concession in addition to verification (SPOT, n.d.-b). This means that not all veterinary clinics in Slovenia operate in the same institutional position: some operate primarily as private service providers. In contrast, others are more directly involved in implementing public tasks. Such a framework significantly affects the clinic's perception in the local environment, as it can be understood not only as a service provider but also as a carrier of broader professional and public functions.

The small-animal segment is strongly represented in the Slovenian veterinary environment. In the 2025 edition of Facts & Figures, largely based on 2023 data, FEDIAF (2025) reported that Slovenia was home to 301,000 dogs and 465,000 cats. These figures indicate that the pet veterinary services sector is not only thriving but also substantial, underscoring the importance of prevention, diagnostics, therapy, and owner education activities of veterinary clinics. Against this backdrop, pet veterinary services cannot be reduced to individual treatments or isolated visits. They are often based on repeated encounters, which highlights the importance of trust, continuous communication, and consistent positive impressions of the clinic among users.

### **3.2 Competitive environment**

The competitive environment of veterinary clinics in Slovenia can be understood as a combination of a regulated entry structure, organisational diversity, and locally conditioned user choices. Because providers must meet formal professional and organisational requirements from the outset, competition is not primarily about basic operational legality but about what users perceive as added value. This includes the breadth and specialisation of services, accessibility, ordering organisation, responsiveness, quality of communication, continuity of care, and the sense of trust the clinic inspires in animal owners. In such an environment, formal qualifications serve as a threshold for entry, while competitive advantage is achieved primarily through user experience and long-term credibility (SPOT, n.d.-c; Pun, 2020; Brown, 2018).

Another distinctive feature of the Slovenian competitive environment is its heterogeneity. Some veterinary organisations are more prominent in the pet services market, while others operate more closely with the public veterinary service and concession relationships. This institutional diversity means that competition is shaped not only by market mechanisms but also by an individual clinic's organisational position, its territorial reach, and the nature of the tasks it performs. In Slovenia, the competitive position of an individual clinic is therefore conditioned by its professional reputation, local involvement, and the institutional framework within which it operates. This is also important for recognition, as users do not

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judge clinics solely as abstract service providers but as concrete, local professional actors (SPOT, n.d.-a; SPOT, n.d.-b; SPOT, n.d.-c).

Another important factor in understanding competition in Slovenia is that veterinary services are among those with a high level of user involvement. As a rule, the pet owner does not decide solely on price or proximity, but also on perceived professionalism, recommendations, a sense of safety, staff responsiveness, and the overall quality of the relationship. In such a setting, a clinic's competitive edge is determined not only by professional knowledge in the narrow sense but also by its ability to articulate its professional value effectively and to back it up through daily practice. This is why competitiveness in Slovenia can also be understood as a matter of branding, because a clinic becomes stronger in competition only when, in the eyes of users, it is not only characterised by formal professionalism but also by the set of feelings of reliability, professionalism, and relationship they experience in connection with it (Brown, 2018; Pun, 2020; Janke et al., 2021; Groves et al., 2024).

### 3.3 Specifics of creating recognition in Slovenia

In Slovenia, the recognition of veterinary clinics is shaped at the intersection of local involvement, professional credibility and digital visibility. Because it is a highly relational, professionally sensitive, and sometimes emotionally charged activity, personal recommendations continue to carry significant weight. Local networks of trust, users' past experiences, and the reputation a clinic builds in a particular environment usually shape animal owners' decisions. This is particularly relevant in the Slovenian market, which is relatively small, where information, recommendations, and reviews spread very quickly, and the clinic's long-term image is shaped through repeated direct and indirect contact.

However, the initial encounter with a veterinary clinic is often no longer face-to-face. The Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (2025) reports that in the first quarter of 2025, 92% of the population aged 16 to 74 had used the internet, while 94% of households with people in this age group had home internet access. This indicates that digital accessibility in Slovenia is quite high. Hence, the online presence of a veterinary clinic is no longer merely a supporting element but a significant part of its public image, accessibility, and initial credibility. The website, the presentation of services, the accessibility of contact information, the presence on social networks, and online reviews are increasingly influencing whether the clinic is perceived as modern, professional, and trustworthy.

In such circumstances, recognition is not built solely through visual identity or promotion, but primarily through consistency between what the clinic communicates and what the user experiences. In the Slovenian context, this consistency is particularly important given the limited market size, the strong weight of personal recommendations, and the relatively rapid spread of opinions among users. A clinic that wants to project a professional image, a friendly approach, and open service to the community needs to demonstrate these qualities through direct interactions, because any failure to do so will damage its credibility. Achieving recognition in Slovenia requires continuous identity verification rather than reaching specific levels of public visibility.

Hence, understanding veterinary clinic recognition in Slovenia requires integrating three interconnected layers. One is local visibility, which relies on direct encounters, word of mouth, and the clinic's embeddedness in the community. The second is professional credibility, which stems from the quality of work, clarity of communication, and the trust the clinic builds with users. The third is digital visibility, which increasingly shapes first impressions and influences users' initial choices. Only by intertwining these three levels can a clinic in Slovenia develop a recognisable and more lasting public image. It is this connection between local reputation, professional quality, and digital presence that serves as the key starting point for further empirical consideration in the research.

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## 4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS, METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH APPROACH

### 4.1 Research questions and research approach

The research assumes that the branding and recognition of veterinary clinics in Slovenia cannot be explained solely by external marketing activities, but must also be understood through the perspectives of those who run the clinics, shape their professional orientation, and co-create their relationships with animal owners daily. Therefore, the objective of this study is to analyse how owners of veterinary clinics in Slovenia perceive their clinics' branding and recognition, and to what extent they consider trust, communication, user experience, and digital presence to be crucial elements.

This led to the development of three research questions:

- RQ1: What do the owners of veterinary clinics in Slovenia consider the main factors in building their clinics' brand?
- RQ2: What do the owners of veterinary clinics in Slovenia consider the key elements of their clinics' recognition in the Slovenian context?
- RQ3: What do the owners of veterinary clinics in Slovenia think about the roles of trust, communication, user experience, and digital presence in building brand and clinic recognition?

The research questions are exploratory and interpretive. The study was not designed to test predefined hypotheses but to examine how veterinary clinic owners understand, explain, and make sense of brand development and recognition in their everyday professional and managerial practice. This orientation aligns with the study's qualitative design, which emphasises meaning, experience, and contextual interpretation rather than statistical measurement.

### 4.2 Methodology and interview guide

A qualitative exploratory research design was used because the study focuses on the meanings, interpretations, and practical experiences of veterinary clinic owners. Brand development and recognition in veterinary services are not only marketing phenomena but are also connected to professional credibility, client relationships, service quality, local reputation, and digital communication. A qualitative approach was therefore appropriate for examining how clinic owners interpret these dimensions and relate them to the everyday operation of their clinics (Creswell & Poth, 2023).

Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection method. This approach grounds the study in predetermined thematic outlines aligned with the research questions and theoretical framework, while also allowing interviewees to elaborate on their experiences and raise issues that could not be fully anticipated in advance. A semi-structured interview was therefore suitable for researching brand understanding, recognition, trust, communication, user experience and digital presence in the specific context of veterinary clinics (Busetto et al., 2020). It is important to note that veterinary activity in Slovenia takes place within the framework of verified veterinary organisations, which further defines the professional and institutional framework of the field in question (SPOT, n.d.-c).

The interview guide was developed from the research questions and the theoretical framework. It covered several thematic areas: understanding of the clinic brand, sources of recognition, trust and professional reputation, communication with animal owners, user experience, and digital presence. Examples of guiding questions included: How do you understand your veterinary clinic's brand? What makes your clinic recognisable in the local environment? How do new clients usually become aware of your clinic? What role do trust and professional reputation play in choosing a veterinary clinic? How do you communicate with animal owners in routine and more demanding situations? Which elements of the client experience are most important for the clinic's public image? What role do the website, social media, online reviews, and other digital channels play in the clinic's visibility? The questions

were used flexibly, with follow-up questions added when interviewees raised new or particularly relevant issues.

### 4.3 Sample and data collection

The research sample was selected purposefully and included nine owners of private veterinary clinics from across Slovenia. The selection of interviewees was based on the assumption that clinic owners combine professional, managerial, and business perspectives on the organisation's operations and can therefore provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the clinic's brand and recognition.

Rather than focusing on statistical representativeness, the sample design emphasised the content's relevance and the participants' informativeness. Quantitative measurement of the frequency of individual phenomena was not the goal; instead, the aim was to gain an in-depth understanding of the interviewees' perspectives and experiences within a particular professional and business environment. The logic of information power can also justify the appropriateness of such a sample, according to which the sufficiency of a sample in qualitative research does not depend solely on the number of interviews, but primarily on how much substantively relevant and in-depth data the selected sample yields (Malterud et al., 2016; Czernek-Marszałek & McCabe, 2024).

The basic characteristics of the interviewees are presented in Table 1. To protect anonymity, some data are presented in intervals or in a generalised form. In total, nine owners of private veterinary clinics from various regions of Slovenia participated in the research. They also varied in their work experience and in the length of time their clinics had been operating. The interviewees' years of work ranged from 10 to 30, while the clinics' operational periods ranged from 5 to 25 years. This heterogeneity reflects the private veterinary sector's diverse organisational and professional perspectives. When presenting the interviewees' characteristics, the data were intentionally limited to information relevant to the research, thereby preventing indirect identification of the interviewees.

Table 1: Basic characteristics of interviewees

Feature	Sample description
Number of interviewees	9
Interviewee status	owners of private veterinary clinics
Role in the organisation	managerial and professional roles in the operation of the clinic
Length of work experience	from 10 to 30 years
Clinic operating period	from 5 to 25 years
Territorial dispersion	different parts of Slovenia
Key common feature	active involvement in the professional, organisational, and business operations of the clinic

To protect anonymity and account for the limited relevance of some personal data to the research, the data in Table 1 are presented in a generalised manner. This is because the sample is small and purposive, drawn from a relatively specific professional environment, where more precise personal and organisational characteristics could increase the risk of indirect identification of the interviewees. Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews conducted in January and February 2026. Interviewees were identified and invited to participate through purposive sampling, with the main criterion being ownership of private veterinary clinics and active participation in the clinic's professional, organisational, and business management. Potential interviewees were contacted by email and in person. Participants received prior notification of the study's goals, the specific subjects to be examined, the estimated time required for the interview process, and the procedure for utilising the acquired research results.

The interview sessions ranged from 25 to 40 minutes. The interviews took place via video conferencing to facilitate participation and accommodate interviewees' schedules. The interviews followed the interview guide described in the methodology section.

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The interviews were recorded with the interviewees' permission and transcribed afterwards. During data preparation for analysis, the transcripts were anonymised to prevent the disclosure of personal details, clinic names, and other identifying information about individual interviewees. This approach enabled comparisons between interviews while allowing sufficient scope to identify differences in individual opinions and experiences.

#### **4.4 Data analysis**

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the collected information, as this approach is particularly suitable for research aimed at identifying, organising, and interpreting patterns of meaning in qualitative data. In the present study, this choice was appropriate because the aim was not only to describe the interviewees' views but also to understand how veterinary practice owners make sense of brand development and recognition and the meanings they attribute to trust, communication, user experience, and digital presence (Braun & Clarke, 2024).

The analysis was conducted in several stages. First, all transcripts were read multiple times to become familiar with the material and identify initial areas of meaning. In the second stage, segments of text relevant to the research questions were coded manually. The unit of coding was not a fixed sentence or paragraph but a meaningful segment of the interview that referred to brand development, recognition, trust, communication, user experience, reputation, or digital presence.

Initial codes were developed inductively from the interview material, while the broader sensitising concepts from the theoretical framework guided interpretation. Examples of initial codes included professional reliability, quality of treatment, client trust, clear explanation, empathy in communication, local reputation, word-of-mouth recommendation, digital first impression, online reviews, and consistency between image and experience. These codes were then compared across interviews and grouped into broader thematic clusters.

In the third stage, the thematic clusters were reviewed against the research questions and the full interview material. Codes with similar meanings were combined, while those pointing to different dimensions of the phenomenon were kept separate. The analysis did not focus solely on how often a topic appeared, but also on its interpretive relevance for understanding how clinic owners conceptualise brand and recognition. In the final stage, the themes were refined and named. The final themes are presented in Table 2 and form the basis for the presentation and interpretation of the results.

This procedure strengthened methodological transparency by showing how the analysis progressed from interview transcripts to initial codes, from codes to thematic clusters, and from thematic clusters to final themes.

#### **4.5 Ethical aspects of research**

The research was conducted in accordance with the fundamental ethical standards of qualitative research. Anonymisation was applied when labelling interviewees, presenting quotes, and describing the organisational characteristics of clinics; therefore, some data in the table are presented in broader categories or in a generalised form. Participation in the research was voluntary, and interviewees were informed about the purpose of the research, the interview content framework, and the method for using the collected data before the interviews. Special attention was paid to protecting confidentiality and anonymising data, as the research involves the professional views, experiences, and interpretations of individuals working in a relatively specific professional environment. In both the analysis and the presentation of the data, all interviewees were assigned neutral code names (I1-I9), and any data that could indirectly identify them were either removed or generalised in quotes and descriptions.

Respecting ethical principles was crucial not only for the fair conduct of the research but also for building a relationship of trust between the researcher and the interviewees. Indeed,

the interviewees' sense of safety and confidentiality was the main reason they could talk openly and reflectively about the topic, and the quality of the data collected relied heavily on it. Hence, ethical consciousness was maintained throughout the research process, from data collection to analysis and the reporting of results (Potthoff et al., 2023).

## 5 RESULTS

### 5.1 Key factors in brand formation

The analysis of the interviews shows that the owners of veterinary clinics understand their clinics' brands much more broadly than their visual images or promotional activities. In their answers, the brand is primarily seen as the result of the clinic's daily operations, particularly in professional quality, communication, attitude towards animal owners, work organisation, and the impression the clinic creates in the local environment. The interviewees, therefore, do not understand the brand as an external marketing addition, but as an expression of how the clinic actually works and how users experience it through repeated contact.

Table 2: Final themes and subthemes of the reflexive thematic analysis

Main topic	Subtopics
Veterinary clinic brand development	professionalism and quality of treatment; relations and communication with animal owners; organisation and consistency of operations; supporting role of visual and digital image
Recognition of the veterinary clinic in the Slovenian environment	local presence; recommendations from satisfied animal owners; professional reputation; clear clinic identity
Trust, communication and user experience	trust as the foundation of the relationship; clear, respectful and empathetic communication; holistic user experience; consistency between professional quality and relations with animal owners
Digital presence, recommendations and reputation	digital presence as the first point of contact; limitations of digital image without actual quality; importance of online reviews and recommendations; reputation as a long-term result of consistent performance

Across the four themes, the analysis shows that clinic owners view brand and recognition not as separate marketing outcomes but as the result of repeatedly confirmed professional credibility. The central analytical pattern is that brand development is grounded internally in professional quality, communication and organisational consistency. At the same time, recognition is externally validated through client experience, recommendations, local reputation and digital visibility. Trust connects these two levels: it transforms professional performance into a recognisable public image. This pattern is particularly important because it indicates that, in the Slovenian veterinary context, brand recognition is less a consequence of promotional exposure and more a consequence of socially validated credibility.

The interviewees' answers clearly showed that they most closely associate the clinic brand with professionalism, treatment quality, client attitude, and consistency in work. Several interviewees emphasised that the brand begins to form when the user recognises professional reliability and a sense of security. I1, I6 and I9 specifically emphasised that the long-term strength of the brand does not come from a single appearance or promotional activity, but from consistent, professional, expert work over time. This is also well illustrated by the statement of one of the interviewees: "People do not remember us because of the logo, but because they know that we will do what needs to be done professionally and that they can get a sense of security with us." (I1). Such emphasis shows that, in the interviewees' eyes, the brand is closely associated with the feeling that the clinic operates responsibly, correctly, and professionally.

In addition to the professional dimension, the brand's relational dimension is also evident in the answers. I2 and I7 emphasised that users of the clinic evaluate it not only by the

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success of the treatment but also by the manner of communication, the friendliness of the staff, the feeling of acceptance, and the respectful attitude in all interactions with the clinic. This shows that the brand is perceived by the interlocutors not only as a professional category but also as a relational and experiential one. For users, it is important how the clinic communicates with them, how it explains its decisions, and what feelings it evokes during the treatment process.

The next important point concerns the internal organisation and coordination of the clinic's operations. I5 pointed out that users also form an impression of the clinic based on the orderliness of the ordering process, the speed with which they receive information, and the team's level of coordination. I9 also warned that inconsistency or uneven service can quickly weaken the brand's perception, even if the clinic's professional level is otherwise high. I8 emphasised that it is also important for brand development that the clinic clearly knows what it wants to be recognised for and consistently expresses this identity in its work.

According to the interviewees, visual elements and external image play a supporting rather than a central role. I4 emphasised that the online image, logo, and communication materials can contribute to a professional first impression but do not, in themselves, create a strong brand. Similarly, I1 noted that an external image without substantive professional content and credibility cannot strengthen trust in the long term. The results thus show that veterinary practice owners understand brand development primarily as a long-term process based on quality, consistency and credibility.

## **5.2 Factors that make veterinary clinics recognisable**

An important set of results concerns the recognition of veterinary clinics in Slovenia. The interviewees mostly understand recognition as the result of several interrelated factors, among which they most often highlighted local presence, recommendations from satisfied animal owners, professional reputation, long-standing operation, and digital visibility. Their answers show that recognition is understood not only as general visibility but primarily as a clear, content-defined perception through which users remember the clinic.

The importance of local positioning was particularly pronounced. I3 and I9 emphasised that recognition within the Slovenian space is built gradually, through a constant presence in the environment, repeated user experiences and personal contacts. Such recognition is closely linked to local trust and the clinic's long-term presence in the community. The answers indicate that the interviewees view the Slovenian context as an environment in which reputation and recognition are primarily transmitted through direct encounters and recommendations rather than through formal promotional activities.

Recommendations also play a major role in recognition. I3 emphasised that new users often choose a clinic based on other pet owners' experiences. At the same time, I6 highlighted that the clinic's professional reputation in the local environment significantly shapes its broader public recognition. This is also illustrated by the following statement: "In our environment, what matters most is that someone recommends you because they had a good experience; this is how recognition is actually built here." (I3). This shows that a clinic's recognition in Slovenia is closely linked to social trust. The interviewees, therefore, do not understand recognition primarily as an effect of advertising, but as the result of gradually built credibility.

The answers also showed that a clear clinic identity is important for stronger recognition. I8 emphasised that a clinic is more recognisable when users associate it with something concrete, such as a specialisation, a professional orientation, or a characteristic way of working. I1 also pointed out that a clinic becomes truly recognisable when users spontaneously associate it with quality, reliability, and a particular way of operating. The results, therefore, show that the interlocutors understand recognition as a content-defined perception, in which it is not only crucial that the clinic is visible, but above all, what it is recognised for.

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### 5.3 The role of trust, communication and user experience

One of the most striking findings of the analysis is that the interviewees view trust as a fundamental element of both the brand and the recognition of a veterinary clinic. In their responses, trust does not appear as an accompanying factor but as the central basis of a long-term relationship between the clinic and the user. I1 emphasised that clients return primarily when they feel the treatment is professionally justified and that the clinic operates reliably. I6 added an ethical dimension to this, highlighting the importance of honesty, transparency and the perception that the clinic acts responsibly. Trust is not built instantly, I9 pointed out; rather, it is built over time through consistency.

The interviewees indicated that trust largely stems from communication. I2 noted that communication with the client should be clear, respectful, and comprehensible, as animal owners' decisions are often made under emotionally demanding circumstances. According to I2, quality communication presents professional information in a sufficiently understandable way without losing its professional weight. I7 also emphasised that users quickly perceive whether the communication is empathetic, calm, and genuine, which significantly affects their overall assessment of the clinic. This is illustrated by the following statement: "Even the most professional decision is of little help if you cannot explain it to the owner calmly, clearly and in a way that he understands." (I2). The answers show that the interviewees do not view communication as an additional skill beyond professional service, but as one of the key mechanisms through which trust is established.

Closely related to this, the results also include user experience, which the interviewees understand as a broader framework for evaluating the clinic. I5 emphasised that the user experiences the clinic throughout the journey, from ordering and appointment availability to treatment itself and subsequent communication. I7 highlighted the importance of staff friendliness, space tidiness, organisation, and the overall atmosphere in the clinic. I2 also noted that an otherwise professionally well-executed service can leave a worse impression on the user if it is accompanied by unclear communication or poor organisation. The results, therefore, show that the interviewees understand user experience as an important mechanism for strengthening both trust and the clinic's public image.

### 5.4 Digital presence, recommendations and reputation

An extremely important set of results concerns the role of digital presence, recommendations and reputation. The interviewees place increasing importance on digital presence, but mostly view it as a supporting or entry-level element rather than a substitute for the quality of the work itself. I4 emphasised that many animal owners first check out the clinic online, so the website, basic information, photos, contact details, and overall digital impression are important for making a first impression. I5 also noted that digital accessibility of information reduces users' uncertainty and facilitates their first contact with the clinic. According to the interviewees, digital presence strongly influences how easily the clinic is accessible and how professional it is perceived to be.

However, the interviewees also noted that a digital presence in itself is insufficient. I1 pointed out that an online presence can arouse interest, but in the long term, it cannot replace professional-quality work. I7 similarly emphasised that the digital image must reflect the clinic's experience; otherwise, it can create a gap between users' expectations and their experience. The following statement also summarises this position: "The website is important for the first impression, but if the experience in the clinic does not confirm this, a good digital image in itself does not mean much." (I7). The responses, therefore, show a uniform position that digital presence acts primarily as the starting point of the relationship between the clinic and the user, and its long-term value depends on whether the clinic also confirms it in direct service.

The role of recommendations was also very prominent. I3 emphasised that in Slovenia, personal recommendations carry considerable weight, as people often trust the experiences of other pet owners when choosing a veterinary clinic. I9 added that recommendations

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generally stem from long-term, satisfied animal owners and are therefore an important indicator of established recognition. I4 also highlighted the importance of online reviews, which help potential users gain insight into others' experiences. Recommendations thus appear in the interviewees' answers as an important bridge between individual experience and the clinic's broader public image.

The following quote also illustrates the importance of reputation: "Reputation is built over a long period of time; it is based on acting correctly, professionally and honestly even when the situation is challenging." (I6). This is also well illustrated by interviewee I1, who states that users of the clinic remember it not only by its visual image but also by the feeling of professionalism and safety it evokes. I3, however, pointed out that in the local environment, reputation is quickly transmitted among users and is therefore closely linked to both the actual quality of work and the way the clinic appears in the community. The results thus show that interviewees understand reputation as a long-term outcome of the clinic's professional quality, trust, recommendations, and consistent operations.

## **6 DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

The discussion is structured around three interpretive contributions of the study. The findings confirm existing service branding literature by showing that, in services, a brand is created through experience, perceived quality, trust and consistency rather than through visual identity alone. At the same time, the study extends this literature by showing that in veterinary clinics, brand development is particularly shaped by the combination of professional authority and relational quality, as animal owners evaluate not only clinical competence but also explanation, empathy, accessibility, and a sense of safety. The findings also specify the Slovenian context by showing that recognition is strongly embedded in local reputation, word-of-mouth recommendations, and the clinic's credibility within a relatively small and socially connected market. The scientific contribution of the study, therefore, lies in conceptualising the veterinary clinic brand as a form of professionally grounded and socially validated credibility.

### **6.1 The veterinary clinic brand as an expression of professional quality and relationships with animal owners**

The findings on the first research question indicate that veterinary practice owners do not primarily view the brand as a communication or visual marker, but rather as a reflection of professional quality, organisational consistency, and their relationship with animal owners. This understanding goes beyond the brand's narrow promotional concept. It aligns more closely with modern service approaches, in which the brand is formed through the experience, interaction, and perceived credibility of the organisation. In this sense, the findings confirm that, in service activities, the strength of the brand is closely related to the organisation's ability to consistently affirm its identity in practice, not only in its external presentation (Pareek & Harrison, 2020; Vukasović & Jagodič, 2025).

The results carry particular weight precisely because they stem from the veterinary context. A veterinary clinic is not a conventional service organisation but a space where professional decision-making, ethical responsibility, and the user's emotional burden are constantly intertwined. This means the brand cannot be understood in isolation from the sense of professional security the clinic evokes in the animal owner. Compared with other service activities, professional credibility is therefore an even more prominent part of the brand's core identity in the veterinary environment, not merely one of the factors that support it. The findings thus indicate that, in the veterinary sector, the brand is less symbolic and more of a relational-professional construct.

An important implication of these findings is that professionalism alone is not sufficient for a strong brand. The interviewees place it at the centre, but they also understand it in relation to communication, respect, work organisation, and user experience. This shows that, in the veterinary environment, professional excellence is assessed not only by the

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technical correctness of the treatment but also by the clinic's ability to present it in an understandable, calm, and trustworthy manner. This finding complements the broader literature on service brands, as it shows that, in professionally sensitive activities, the boundary between professional and relational quality is significantly more intertwined than in more standardised services.

Theoretically, this suggests that the brand of a veterinary clinic should be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon arising at the intersection of professional competence, organisational consistency, and the quality of relationships with animal owners. This connection is one of the central contributions of the research, as it shows that clinic owners do not view the brand as an addition to the core activity, but rather as a reflection of how the clinic functions as a whole. In this way, the research contributes to a more accurate understanding of the brand in service and health-related activities, where the user not only assesses the service but also the reliability of the organisation that provides it.

## **6.2 Recognition as a result of local involvement, recommendations and a clear identity**

Findings related to the second research question indicate that interviewees do not understand recognition primarily as a matter of exposure, but rather as the socially approved, content-clear presence of the clinic in the environment. This means that recognition is not reduced to visibility but is closely tied to what the clinic is known for, how users position it among other providers, and the extent to which they associate it with a particular quality, orientation, or way of working. This understanding aligns with modern approaches to brand recognition in service activities, where it is important not only that the organisation is noticed but also that it occupies a clear, distinctive place in users' minds (Shams et al., 2024; Pocchiari et al., 2025).

The special significance of these findings lies in their situatedness within the Slovenian context. The results indicate that, in Slovenia, the recognition of veterinary clinics is shaped primarily by local presence, recommendations, and reputation, i.e., by mechanisms that are distinctly social and relational. In a relatively small and interconnected environment, visibility is not primarily the result of intensive promotion, but rather of repeated confirmation within the local community. This is an important finding because it shows that the Slovenian context is highly relevant to understanding visibility: the public image of a clinic is not formed in an abstract market space, but in concrete networks of trust, recommendations, and experiences.

From this perspective, the role of recommendations is particularly important. The results show not only that recommendations influence the choice of a clinic but also that they serve as a mechanism for translating individual experience into broader public credibility. A recommendation from another user serves as social proof, confirming the clinic's trustworthiness. This process further establishes the distinction between visibility and recognition. A clinic can be present in public space without being truly recognisable; however, it only becomes recognisable when users associate it with something clear and stable.

At a theoretical level, the findings indicate that, in the Slovenian veterinary context, recognition should be understood as a form of socially validated credibility. This represents a slightly different emphasis from more classic marketing approaches, which often prioritise visibility through recall, presence, and consistent communication. In this context, local reputation, relational reliability, and a clear clinic identity are more important for visibility. This contextual placement is an important contribution of the research.

## **6.3 Trust, communication, user experience and digital presence**

The results of the study, in relation to our third research question, show that trust is the central connecting element between the brand and the recognition of a veterinary clinic. It does not appear as one of several factors, but as a fundamental condition for the user to

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form a positive, more lasting, and publicly transferable judgement about the clinic. In this regard, the results confirm broader findings in the service and healthcare environments, where perceived quality, trust, satisfaction, and loyalty are closely related (Liang, 2022; Kumar et al., 2024). In the context of a veterinary clinic, trust plays an even more prominent role due to the emotional involvement of animal owners and the asymmetry of professional knowledge.

It is therefore particularly important that communication is not presented in the results as a supplementary skill, but as a key mechanism through which the clinic's professional value is translated into an understandable and acceptable experience for the user. This is one of the most significant interpretative findings of the research. Professional quality, in itself, is not necessarily sufficient if it is not conveyed in a way that creates a sense of clarity, security and respectful treatment. In this sense, the results confirm the importance of veterinary communication as a core professional competence, rather than merely a supporting element of clinical work (Pun, 2020; Kleinsorgen & Artemiou, 2025).

An important complement to this finding is the emphasis on the user experience. The research shows that users evaluate the clinic holistically, from the first contact through subsequent communication. This means that the public image of the clinic is shaped not only at the moment of treatment but also by how it is organised, its responsiveness, the friendliness of the staff, and the overall sense of order. Such a finding is important for the theory of service brands, as it confirms that brand perception is strengthened through a series of connected touchpoints, in which the user does not strictly separate these levels into professional and non-professional but instead experiences them as a single experience.

Digital presence plays a more restrained yet still important role in the results. It is not seen as the core of the brand, but as an important entry point to the relationship between the clinic and the user. This emphasis is particularly interesting because it shows that, in the veterinary environment, the digital image alone is not enough to build a long-term brand unless it aligns with the experience. This means that digital presence primarily serves as a mechanism for initial accessibility, reducing uncertainty and shaping the first impression. Its long-term value depends on whether it is validated by direct service. In the Slovenian context, where recommendations and local reputation carry great weight, this consistency between the digital impression and the experience is particularly important.

Taken together, these findings suggest that separate factors do not determine a veterinary practice's brand and recognition, but rather an interconnected system of professional quality, trust, communication, user experience, and digital accessibility. In this context, the research's central interpretative contribution is clear. The article thus contributes not only to understanding what practice owners emphasise as important, but also to a broader theoretical understanding of how brand and recognition are created in professionally sensitive service activities through consistently confirmed credibility.

#### **6.4 Recommendations for practice**

The findings suggest that veterinary clinics should manage their brand as part of the entire service system, not merely as a matter of visual identity or external communication. Brand management should therefore include professional standards, communication practices, the organisation of client contact, digital accessibility, the management of recommendations, and consistency of the overall user experience. From a practical perspective, every point of contact between the clinic and the client contributes to the clinic's perceived credibility.

Consistency in professional and organisational operations is particularly important. Veterinary clinics can strengthen their brand over the long term, especially when users perceive stability, reliability and a predictable level of quality. This means it makes sense to pay attention not only to professional protocols and treatment quality, but also to internal team coordination, unity in the way of working, and a clear definition of what the clinic wants to be recognised for. A strong brand in such an environment is not formed primarily by promises, but by consistently fulfilling them in everyday practice.

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Communication with animal owners is also an important area. Since the research showed that users judge the quality of a clinic by the clarity of explanations, the sense of respect, and the general manner of treatment, it makes sense to treat communication as a strategic competence. Clinics should systematically develop the ability to communicate clearly, calmly, respectfully and empathetically, especially in situations that are uncertain or emotionally burdensome for pet owners. It is not only important how the veterinarian communicates, but also how the entire team communicates, as the user experience is shaped at every point of contact with the organisation.

Further attention should be paid to user experience management. Clinics should also focus on service elements that are not directly related to professional treatment but significantly shape the organisation's overall impression. These include the ordering process, responsiveness, information accessibility, cleanliness of the space, staff friendliness, clarity of instructions, and continuity of communication after treatment. It is in these areas that the impression of the clinic's professionalism and reliability is often formed. It makes sense for clinics to periodically review the entire user journey and identify where unnecessary uncertainty, ambiguity, or organisational inconsistency occurs.

In Slovenia, the way recognition is constructed is particularly important. The results show that local presence, recommendations, and professional reputation are central to the clinic's public image. Clinics should therefore build recognition through consistently maintained and trustworthy practices, not only through promotional activities. The real impact is achieved when animal owners associate a clinic with specific quality standards, professional reliability, and a recognisable way of working. A clear identity for a clinic is important in this regard because it allows users to remember it more easily and distinguish it from other providers.

An important but supporting part of the clinic's broader perception system is its digital presence. The website needs to present basic information, contact details, digital accessibility features, and an overall online appearance that is organised and up to date, matching the clinic's experience. The team must eliminate user uncertainty, as the website serves as the first point of contact and establishes the organisation's trustworthiness. A digital presence is therefore most effective when it realistically reflects the clinic's professional and organisational level, as well as its relationship with animal owners.

Based on the overall analysis, it is recommended that veterinary clinics treat brand and recognition as the outcome of long-term, coordinated action. The greatest impact can be expected when the clinic combines professional quality, effective communication, a well-thought-out user experience, a clear identity, local reputation and a credible digital presence into a unified and consistent public image.

## 6.5 Research limitations

The study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. The research is based on a small purposive sample of nine owners of private veterinary clinics. Although this sample is appropriate for an exploratory qualitative study, the findings cannot be generalised to all veterinary clinics in Slovenia. In qualitative interview research, sample adequacy is determined primarily by the relevance and depth of participants' information (Malterud et al., 2016; Czernek-Marszałek & McCabe, 2024). The results should therefore be understood as an interpretive account of selected owners' perspectives rather than as a representative assessment of the entire Slovenian veterinary sector.

Another limitation concerns the study's empirical perspective. The research focuses solely on clinic owners. This is relevant because owners combine professional, managerial and strategic perspectives, but it also narrows the empirical scope. The study excludes veterinarians who are not owners, other employees, clients, animal owners who changed clinics, and representatives of professional institutions. As a result, the findings may emphasise managerial and professional self-understandings more strongly than client perceptions or external evaluations of brand recognition. This limitation is important

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because qualitative findings are always shaped by the selected participants, the research context and the study's interpretive focus (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Ahmed, 2024).

The study also relies on self-reported interview data. Interviewees may present their clinics favourably or emphasise values such as professionalism, trust and communication, as these are normatively expected in veterinary practice. This limitation is common in qualitative interview research, where participants may provide socially desirable accounts of their views and practices, consciously or unconsciously (Bergen & Labonté, 2020). The study, therefore, captures how owners interpret and present brand development, but it cannot directly verify whether clients experience the clinics in the same way.

The study's focus on Slovenia should also be considered when assessing the transferability of the findings. This focus is a strength, enabling contextual interpretation, but it also limits transferability to larger or differently structured veterinary markets. Consistent with qualitative research, the aim is not statistical generalisation but analytical and contextual understanding of the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Braun & Clarke, 2024). Future research could address these limitations by including clients, employees and other stakeholders, comparing different types of veterinary organisations, and combining qualitative interviews with survey data or analysis of digital reviews.

## 7 CONCLUSION

The paper examined how owners of veterinary clinics in Slovenia understand their clinics' branding and recognition, and the role they attribute to trust, communication, user experience, and digital presence. The topic is important because veterinary clinics operate at the intersection of professional healthcare services, customer relationship management, and the increasingly prominent digital environment. In this context, a brand cannot be understood solely as an external sign of recognition, but rather as the result of a broader, longer-term process shaped by the clinic's daily operations.

The findings show that owners of veterinary clinics primarily view their clinics' brands as expressions of professional quality, consistency, credibility, and the way they treat animal owners. In their understanding, a strong brand is built not primarily through promotion, but through reliable professional work, clear and respectful communication, good organisation, and a positive overall user experience. It also emerged that recognition of a clinic in Slovenia depends not only on general visibility but primarily on what it is recognised for and how firmly its image is embedded in the local environment. Recommendations, local reputation, direct user experiences, and a clear clinic identity play important roles in this.

A particularly important finding of the research is that trust serves as a central link between brand and recognition. It is formed through repeated experiences in which the user recognises professional safety, honesty, consistency and responsible behaviour. Communication plays a key role in this process, as it is not merely an accompaniment to the service but a fundamental way the user understands, values, and trusts the clinic. The same applies to the user experience, which is shaped not only at the moment of treatment but throughout the user's journey from first contact to subsequent communication. Digital presence was recognised as an important factor in initial perception and accessibility, but not as an independent carrier of the brand. Its role becomes meaningful only when the direct service experience confirms the expectations created through digital channels.

The study's contribution lies in its contextual and conceptual specification of service branding theory for veterinary clinics. The findings show that a veterinary clinic's brand should be understood as a multidimensional construct, with professional quality, organisational consistency, communication, trust, user experience, and local reputation closely interlinked. The study also shows that, in the Slovenian context, recognition is not primarily based on promotional visibility but on socially confirmed credibility built through local presence, recommendations, and repeated positive experiences. In this way, the paper contributes to a more precise understanding of branding in professionally sensitive, relationship-based service activities.

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Based on the discussion, it can be concluded that the brand of a veterinary clinic in Slovenia is shaped primarily by practice rather than promotion. It is created when professionalism is combined with trust, when communication is clear and respectful, when the user experience is consistent, and when users see the clinic as a credible, reliable, and recognisable professional organisation. It is precisely in the connection between professional excellence, relationships, and public perception that the foundation of the long-term strength of veterinary clinics in Slovenia can be recognised.

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