



DEPARTMENT OF APPLIED IT IT FACULTY

How to live rent free in the minds of Generation Z

A qualitative study about Generation Zers' perception and evaluation of employer branding

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to gain an understanding of Generation Z's (Gen Z) perception and evaluation of what makes a company attractive as a future employer. According to previous research, Gen Z puts a higher value on authenticity and trustworthiness than previous generations, therefore understanding how a company's communication can be perceived as authentic and trustworthy was investigated. As this generation is entering the workforce, knowing how to communicate to attract and retain Gen Z is of significance. A qualitative research method using focus group discussions was employed. The sample consisted of 19 participants (F=17, M=2) aged 18-19 (born 2005), attending their last year of Swedish high school. The data was then analyzed through a Reflexive Thematic Analysis. The findings highlighted user-generated content on social media platforms, word of mouth through personal contacts, and influencers as primary information sources, with a preference for visual, humorous, and relatable content from current or former employees. An unexpected finding was that an excessive amount of advertisements could have a negative effect on the willingness to work for a company. Authenticity, relatability, and consistency were identified as key aspects of perceived employer attractiveness. The employer brand must align with other sources of information about the company for increased perceived authenticity and trustworthiness. While influencers and traditional advertising channels play a role, user-generated content, and personal connections are of higher significance in influencing Gen Zers' opinions regarding employer brands.

Keywords: Generation Z, Employer Branding, Employer Attractiveness, Focus Groups
Discussion, Reflexive Thematic Analysis

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Introduction

Do you want to live rent free in Gen Z's mind? Do you want to go from lowkey to highkey in your employer branding game? Generation Z is after the ultimate workplace vibes. Is this kind of language unfamiliar to you? It is the language of Generation Z (Gen Z) (Dictionary, 2022; Maniece, 2024). To at least assist with the translation of the title of this thesis, 'to live rent free in someone's mind' means to take up a lot of thought and space in a person's mind (Maniece, 2024).

As new generations enter the workforce, new expectations and different needs emerge that employers need to consider. During this decade, Gen Z will become the largest generation, accounting for about one-third of the world population (Pandita, 2021). Gen Z is defined differently by different authors, however, a common age frame is people born after 1995 and before 2010 (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021). Research shows that Gen Z is different from previous generations in what they expect of future employers (e.g. Borg et al., 2023; Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023; Pandita, 2021; Munsch, 2021), and this concern is reflected in different companies as well. For example, Deloitte (Gomez et al., n.d.) has a guide on who the Gen Zers are and how to adapt the workplace to make it more attractive, as does Zurich Insurance Group (McAllister, 2024) and it is a topic discussed in news media (Kelly, 2023). For businesses to continue to develop and thrive, they must adapt to this generation, and learn how to communicate with them. Human capital and knowledge are important for an organization to be successful, including hiring and retaining the best-suited candidates and having them stay with the organization long-term (Mukul & Saini, 2021).

Growing up with digital technology, Gen Zers are digital natives with different qualities than earlier generations, especially regarding the lack of attentiveness to advertisements (Munsch, 2021). However, the term digital natives has been criticized due to its generalization

of a whole generation where digital knowledge can differ depending on background and learning abilities (Enyon, 2020).

Research suggests that the attention span of Gen Z is shrinking. You have approximately 8 seconds to capture the attention of a Gen Zer, according to Conlin and Bauer (2022). This means that for brands to reach this group, they must adapt their branding strategies. The most popular social media platforms for young Swedish people today are YouTube, TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram, even though the usage of Instagram is decreasing (Internetstiftelsen, 2023). More than 50% of Swedish high school students report that they are using these platforms at least once a day, except for Instagram which is used weekly. YouTube often consists of longer videos where the viewer can like and comment to interact with the content, while, TikTok is used for shorter videos (Internetstiftelsen, 2023). Snapchat is mostly used for communicating with friends with pictures or videos which only are available for a short amount of time and you can only view the picture once. Instagram is a social media platform for uploading pictures, short videos, and “stories” which is content that is only uploaded for 24 hours (Internetstiftelsen, 2023). Since these are the most used social media platforms by Gen Zers, brands are trying to reach out to the younger audience through these platforms.

Employer branding is used to enhance the brand’s attractiveness. Employer attractiveness can be both internal and external attractiveness, which refers to attracting new possible candidates for job positions (Mostafa, 2022). There are different strategies for a company to develop its employer brand. Examples of such are influencer marketing, following an employee’s day at the office, recruitment campaigns, and the information shared on the brand’s website. In this study, the focus is on perceived external attraction, and how a company can use its communication channels to increase attraction for new potential job candidates.

The purpose of this study was to explore how the use of employer branding to increase brands' attractiveness is perceived by a younger audience. To investigate this, we conducted a qualitative study based on focus group discussions with Gen Zers, more specifically students in the last year of Swedish high schools (born 2005).

Definitions

Before moving further into this study some definitions of recurring words will be explained. A Gen Zer is a person born between the late 90s and early 2010s and is the first generation to grow up with digital tools, such as the internet and social media (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023c).

Another term important to define is influencer. An influencer is "a person who has become well-known through use of the internet and social media and uses celebrity to endorse, promote, or generate interest in specific products, brands, etc., often for payment." (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023d).

We also want to specify what we mean by *brand*, *company*, and *organization*. Brand and company can be used interchangeably, however, the word brand also refers to the image and identity of a company, and what is affected by the perception of a company. We use the word organization for work instances such as the police force, however, some literature uses companies and organizations interchangeably.

Literature Review

In this section, previous studies, and findings relevant to the topic of this degree project are examined in depth. This section aims to contextualize and establish a foundation for our study as well as identify gaps in the research. First, Gen Z will be further discussed. Second, employer branding and employer attractiveness are elaborated, and lastly, the concept of authenticity according to previous studies and scholars in the field is presented. At the very end of the literature review, the purpose of this study is further developed, and the research questions are presented.

Generation Z

Every generation has its conditions, characteristics, and unique context. In this section, the distinctiveness of Gen Z is presented and discussed. The people of Gen Z are sometimes called digital natives (Munsch, 2021). Being a digital native refers to being “born after the widespread adoption of digital technology” (Solomon, 2017 as cited in Munsch, 2021 p. 11). According to Munsch (2021), the generation before Gen Z, Millennials, born between the early 80s and mid-90s (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024), is also included in the term digital natives. Because this generation has grown up in an era where many hours are spent interacting with digital technology, their main source of information is online (Chang & Chang, 2023). Other characteristics of digital natives are their accustomedness to instant gratification and preference for visual content (Prensky, 2001).

However, the concept of digital natives has been criticized. Eynon (2020) discusses and dismisses the idea that whole generations, ranging over several decades, can be reduced to one homogenous mass. Lack of empirical evidence, no clear generational divide, varying patterns across countries, and socioeconomic differences are factors that are addressed as arguments for the claim (Eynon, 2020). Therefore, one should use the concept of digital

natives with caution. Despite this criticism, the participants of this study (which will be explained further in the methods section) have the relevant background and inhere to the term and definition of digital natives.

Since every generation has different characteristics, it is of interest for this study to further investigate the differentiating attributes of Gen Z and how that affects their perception and evaluation of a company's communication. In a study by Pandita (2021), the characteristics of Gen Z are explored as well as what they expect from a future employer. Gen Z is more individualistic and liberal than earlier generations but is simultaneously concerned with social causes and finds representation and diversity important (Pandita, 2021). Therefore, they expect their workplaces to represent this as well and are attracted to companies that offer flexibility and the opportunity to work individually by self-learning (Pandita, 2021). Other authors also highlight the expectation of corporate social responsibility as one of the most common ways businesses adapt to Gen Z (Benítez-Márquez et. al., 2022). For example, Gen Z has a higher concern regarding environmental issues than previous generations (Chang & Chang, 2023). However, there is contradictory research indicating that corporate social responsibility is of little significance to Gen Z in the workplace (e.g. Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023), indicating that the field requires further and more nuanced research.

Borg et al., (2023) have investigated what is important for Gen Zers when entering the workforce, and their criteria for selecting an employer. Their findings highlighted the importance of guidance and mentoring, which differs from Pandita's (2021) research highlighting individualism. However, it was agreed that flexibility and a good work-life balance were an important factor (Borg et al., 2023; Pandita, 2021). Lassleben and Hofmann (2023) add that Gen Zers wish to have fun at work and value relationships with both colleagues and superiors higher than other factors that have been important for earlier generations, such as childcare, gyms, and other work-life balance enabling services.

One way generations have differed is in how searching for and evaluating information is done. Millennials tend to turn to product reviews to ensure that a brand is worthy of their trust (Munsch, 2021). In contrast, Gen Zers tend to accept user-generated content on social media as something that would enhance confidence in a product or a brand (Munsch, 2021). There is a distinction made between user-generated and brand-generated content (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Brand-generated content is uploaded by the companies themselves whereas user-generated content is uploaded by personal user accounts.

The biggest challenge regarding the digital native generations (Millennials and Gen Z) is their brief attention span when it comes to digital advertising and marketing (Munsch, 2021). A study of how Gen Zers approach and evaluate digital marketing has been done by Hazari and Sethna (2022), who have investigated which factors are related to Gen Z and Millennials being impacted by digital advertisements on Instagram. Their findings showed that to get the attention of Millennials and Gen Z, brands have focused more on creating relationships with their customers and creating emotional bonds between brand and consumer (Hazari & Sethna, 2022). Another way of capturing their attention is through short videos, humor, and popular music (Munsch, 2021). This could explain the popularity of social media platforms that use this format, such as TikTok. Since most social media platforms have the feature of infinity scroll, meaning the amount of content is endless, it is assumed to be more challenging to create content that stands out and engages the targeted audience.

Based on the understanding of Gen Zers' different needs and behaviors compared to previous generations, we make the assumption that the employer branding strategies must be customized to reach this audience.

Employer Branding

Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) are some of the most well-cited researchers regarding employer branding. They define the concept of employer branding; “as the process of

building an identifiable and unique employer identity, and the employer brand as a concept of the firm that differentiates it from its competitors” (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004, p. 502). In other words, employer branding is a way for a company to highlight a distinct and appealing identity, both in-house and outside the company (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). To highlight brand identity and differentiate themselves from other companies in order to attract new candidates they enhance their positive attributes (Kucherov et al., 2022; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). By having successful employer branding, organizations put themselves in a position of advantage in attracting, developing, and retaining talent (Leekha Chhabra & Sharma, 2014).

A study conducted by Kucherov et al. (2022) found that focusing on employer branding gave an increase in the number of applicants for recruitment. There are additional claims that successful employer branding leads to enhanced employee performance (Aldousari et al., 2017). The essence of employer branding, according to the study conducted by Aldousari et al. (2017), is to communicate the brand to generate a positive public perception as effectively as possible, therefore, communication plays a critical role in this process. For companies to differentiate themselves from the competing brands in order to recruit top employees, they highlight their attractive qualities and attributes. However, research has not sufficiently addressed the perceived value from an employee-centric point of view (Ronda et al., 2018). For a successful employer branding strategy, it is crucial to see the employee-centric point of view, since the perception of how beneficial a company’s attributes are can only be evaluated through the lens of current and potential employees. According to Urbancová and Hudáková (2017), factors contributing to a brand’s attractiveness are the employee benefits and work environment, as well as the brand’s reputation which current employees partly form by word of mouth. Leekha Chhabra and Sharma (2014) agree and state that it is “commonly accepted that internal characteristics are transferred to the external environment via the employees of the organisation” (p. 49).

Employer branding is, for the company or organization, a continuous work that should be adapted to current trends and needs to be perceived as credible and authentic to be effective (Urbancová, & Hudáková, 2017). According to Aldousari et al. (2017), companies with successful employer branding can have economic benefits as they can offer lower compensation and still be seen as an attractive employer. Overall, there are many benefits for a company that puts effort into improving its employer branding strategy to increase employer attractiveness (Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023).

Employer Attractiveness

Employer attractiveness is one of the outcomes of employer branding and the two concepts are therefore closely linked. Employer attractiveness has been defined as “the envisioned benefits that a potential employee sees in working for a specific organization” (Berthon, 2005, p. 156) and also the “attitude or expressed general positive affect toward viewing an organization as a desirable entity with which to initiate some relationship” (Reis and Braga, 2016, in Mostafa 2022, p. 2). Dutta and Mishra (2021) explain an organization's attractiveness as how potential candidates perceive an organization, their intentions regarding applying for a position, and their behaviors leading up to the recruitment process. Therefore, to increase employer attractiveness it is important to manage organizational reputation, communication, and employer branding to attract and engage top talent.

The term employer attractiveness includes both internal and external attraction. Internal attractiveness focuses on the current employee's attitude towards the company and their intentions of staying with the organization, meanwhile, external attractiveness refers to how potential candidates perceive an organization as an attractive future employer (Mostafa, 2022). What is meant by potential candidates is anyone who could be interested in applying for a job with the employer.

Being perceived as an attractive employer is a factor that increases the number of applicants to an organization (Bharadwaj, 2024). There are different ways of increasing employer attractiveness. A common tactic for companies is to highlight benefits such as high salaries, secure employment, and flexible work hours to differentiate themselves from other organizations within the same field (Bharadwaj, 2024).

However, it is also important that the perceptions are realistic. Giving new employees a realistic picture of what it would be like to work in an organization and what the job will require is necessary for a suitable fit between employees and the organization as it will increase motivation and decrease turnover (Schroth, 2019). The fit between a person and an organization is defined as “the compatibility or congruence between organizations and their employees on characteristics that are important to both” (Subramanian et al., 2023, p. 1972). A way of creating realistic expectations is to be transparent about both the benefits a company can offer and the requirements and what the job will require from the employee (Schroth, 2019). A problem for Gen Zers entering a workplace can be their lack of previous work experience, and therefore they might have unrealistic expectations (Schroth, 2019). If the perception of what it would be like to work for a company is not realistic, the contrast can lead to the company losing credibility and increasing turnover. Having established the importance of employer attractiveness through a realistic image of the employer, it becomes evident that authenticity in communication plays a crucial role.

Authenticity

Another way Gen Z differs from previous generations is the weight they put on the authenticity of brands. 90% of millennials and Gen Z consider brand authenticity a significant factor when planning or conducting a purchase (Konovalova, 2019 as cited in Campagna et al, 2022). For Baby Boomers, the generation born between the mid-40s and mid-60s (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023a) the same number is 80%, meanwhile, for Gen X, born between the

mid-60s and early 80s (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023b), it is 85%, according to Campagna et al. (2022). Although all four generations acknowledge authenticity as important, Millennials and Gen Z stand out in this context as valuing brand authenticity as a highly significant factor. Campagna et al. (2022) define brand authenticity as “a genuine brand with a unique style that cares about being open and honest with consumers and will survive times and trends” (p. 138). Campagna et al. (2022) conclude that there are gaps in the research regarding this field, and there is a need to research and identify what brands can do to increase and control their perceived authenticity.

When discussing marketing and authenticity today it is impossible to evade the role influencers and social media influence play. Influencers' messages are perceived as “one of the few forms of real, authentic communication” (Scott, 2015 p. 295, in Audrezet et al, 2020). Influencers represent a combination of a celebrity and a friend, as they have a close connection and communication with their followers (Belanche et al., 2021). Influencer marketing is perceived as more authentic when the influencer is approachable as it increases the relatability between the influencer and the consumer (Lee & Eastin, 2021). Influencers share characteristics with consumers and have because of their user-generated content a growing following (Lee & Eastin, 2021). Due to the closeness between influencer and consumer, influencer marketing has shown to be a powerful way to influence and nudge people and their behavior (Audrezet et al, 2020). Audrezet et al. (2020) explored perceived authenticity when influencers are partnering with brands and found that their followers value authenticity through non-commercial content while the influencer wanted personal rewards.

There seems to be an increased expressed need for authenticity and genuineness by consumers, which could be due to the increased exposure to staged or manipulated content in media (Andonopoulos et al., 2023). Andonopoulos et al. (2023), found that social media

influencers who appear authentic and true to their inner self are perceived as more trustworthy by consumers following them, and therefore have more influence to inspire their followers.

When brands are perceived as being inauthentic, it could lead to brand avoidance (Ittefaq et al., 2024). Brand avoidance is when individuals stop purchasing a particular brand of products or stop any involvement with the brand. However, this seems to be strongest correlated with when individuals had a positive image of the brand from the start which they then find to be deceiving (Ittefaq et al., 2024). This happens when there are perceived corporate wrongdoings, such as brands failing to fulfill previous promises (Ittefaq et al., 2024). One instance illustrating this concept occurred in 2024 when a Swedish clothing company previously known for promoting body positivity underwent a rebrand (Bridfelt, 2024). As part of this rebranding, they discontinued the use of so-called plus-size models and stopped offering sizes larger than XL. This decision left many of their customers feeling betrayed.

After a thorough search, the research found was almost exclusively regarding authenticity in customer-company relationships. Based on the examined research, it has been concluded that the research that has been done in the marketing and authenticity field is of relevance in the field of employer branding as well. The literature review has provided a body of research on Gen Z and what Gen Zers desire and expect from brands. The research gap we have identified is how companies' communication is perceived and evaluated as authentic and trustworthy by Gen Z from an employer branding perspective.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to gain an understanding of Gen Z's perception of what makes a company attractive as a future employer. It is crucial to understand the characteristics and context of the next generation to create a successful employer branding strategy. Gen Z will soon be the largest population of the workforce and understanding how to

get their attention is therefore important for the companies who wish to hire the best candidates. Research suggests that Gen Z expect and value different things than previous generations from their employers, and to increase a brand's attractiveness companies must develop skills of communicating this effectively. Through this study, we aim to gain an understanding of how companies can communicate with Gen Z. To reach this goal, the following research questions were constructed:

RQ1: How do Generation Z perceive and evaluate the attractiveness of future employers based on the brand's communication and actions?

Communication can for example be the brand's marketing campaigns and content. Actions are what a company does, not what they explicitly say when they communicate. Both communication and actions can affect the perceived authenticity, hence the second research question.

RQ2: What makes a brand's communication authentic and trustworthy?

Method

To answer the research questions, a qualitative approach was adopted. The empirical data consisted of audio-recorded discussions and transcriptions and was generated through four focus group discussions with 19 Generation Z participants. The data was analyzed with a reflexive thematic approach. First, the research design will be further elaborated, then the sampling and recruitment process will be presented, followed by data collection and data analysis. Lastly, ethical considerations will be discussed.

Research Design

To investigate how Gen Zers perceive and evaluate the attractiveness of future employers based on the brand's communication and action, and understand what makes a brand's communication authentic and trustworthy, we conducted a qualitative study through focus group discussions. Focus group discussions were chosen to make the participants feel comfortable discussing the topic as they were among their peers. Focus group discussions are suitable for research aiming to identify a norm within a study population (Hennink et al., 2020). The aim was to investigate Gen Z as a group with their collective norms and opinions rather than individual views. Furthermore, focus group discussions are commonly used in research regarding marketing and advertising (Clark et al., 2021; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), hence why the method was deemed suitable for the study.

The goal was to have a flowing conversation where the participants could inspire each other while being moderated to stay on the topic. The moderator ensured that everyone could express their thoughts while playing an unobtrusive role, and only intervened when necessary for the discussion or to clarify participants' statements. In focus group discussions, researchers have less control compared to one-on-one interviews (Clark et al., 2021). In this context, the

objective was to minimize interruptions and encourage a free-flowing conversation. The focus was on exploring the participants' associations and spontaneous contributions.

Visual stimulus materials were used based on an integrated approach, meaning the purpose of the stimuli was both used with a projective and facilitation technique (Comi et al., 2014). Projective technique refers to using visual stimuli for direct comments and decreasing the cognitive demands of the participants when discussing a complex topic (Comi et al., 2014). The facilitation technique is instead used to further facilitate the conversation, and it is beneficial for focus group discussion as it gives the participants a common ground to easily follow each other's contributions to the conversation (Comi et al., 2014). Practically, this integrated approach meant that we showed the participants the visual stimuli and asked them to comment on whether they preferred any of the shown examples. The visual stimuli were also used to make it easier for them to remember other examples they had seen before the study, as well as stay on topic. The visual stimuli contained photos and some short videos from real marketing examples (see Appendix A) that have been used to enhance companies' employer brand and increase job applicants. In this study, all the examples were brought by the moderators. To ensure that the examples were relevant and suitable for the targeted group, a test interview with one person in the same age group as the participants was conducted. This led to changing some of the selected examples for other, more suitable ones. A discussion guide (see Appendix B) was constructed beforehand to provide structure for the group discussion (Hennink et al., 2020).

Sampling and Recruitment Process

In this study, we chose to focus on the specific age group of Gen Z who are Swedish high school students (school year 10-13), more specifically senior-year students born in 2005, (by the time of the study 18-19 years old). Senior-year students are at a stage where they are about to choose what they will do after they finish school, either going into the workforce or

further academic studies. To reach this group of participants, we used personal contacts for recruiting members and asked teachers at Swedish high schools located in Gothenburg from the network of one of the authors of this study to help get in contact with suitable participants. We reached out to the teachers through email, with a combined information letter and consent form (see Appendix C) attached. This was to make it clear what was expected from all parties.

Focus groups can either be pre-constituted groups or researcher-constituted groups (Deacon et al., 2021). As we recruited students from existing classes at the schools, the sample can be regarded as pre-constituted, or natural, groups (Clark et al., 2021). The use of pre-constituted groups contributed to the aim of creating a natural context for the participants to feel as comfortable as possible in the situation. However, just because the students who chose to participate in the study came from the same class it is not necessarily the case that they knew each other before.

In total, 19 students participated in the study, divided into four groups consisting of 4-6 members in each group (17 female and 2 male) from two different schools. One group studied social sciences, one economics, and two groups studied natural sciences. Through our recruitment process, we were in contact with seven different groups that agreed to participate, however, three groups canceled before meeting. Even though we met with fewer discussion groups than we would have preferred, the same themes were discussed in the groups without adding more depth, hence it could be argued that saturation in the material was reached (Hennink & Kaiser, 2019).

The participants were given pseudonyms to protect their privacy and are presented with relevant details in Table 1. The size of the groups was consistent with what research mentions as suitable when conducting focus group discussions (Clark et al, 2021; Deacon et al., 2021). The group size was also decided due to the time limitations we had because of the participants' schedules. Additionally, a smaller group size was deemed more beneficial to the

conversation in terms of everyone getting the opportunity to speak and be manageable to moderate (Clark et al., 2021).

Table 1*The Participants*

Participants	Gender (F/M)	Age (years)	School programme
Group 1			
Alba	F	18	Natural science
Beata	F	18	Natural science
Carolina	F	19	Natural science
Denise	F	18	Natural science
Group 2			
Ellinor	F	18	Social science
Felicia	F	18	Social science
Gabriella	F	18	Social science
Hanna	F	18	Social science
Ida	F	18	Social science
Group 3			
Julia	F	18	Economics
Klara	F	18	Economics
Lina	F	18	Economics
Mirjam	F	18	Economics
Noah	M	18	Economics
Oscar	M	19	Economics
Group 4			
Petra	F	19	Natural science
Rebecca	F	18	Natural science
Siri	F	18	Natural science
Tyra	F	18	Natural science

Note: The names have been anonymized and the order of the groups has been randomized. Total number of participants: 19 (F=17, M=2). F stands for female, and M stands for male. School programme refers to the major subjects or specializations the participants attend in their high school.

Data Collection

The focus group discussions were conducted face-to-face at a location mutually agreed upon with each group, which was either their school or the University of Gothenburg campus. The discussions were conducted in closed rooms to avoid distraction. The participants were offered coffee and pastries (Swedish fika) as an incentive for their participation. Then, information about the study and the consent form were reviewed and signed by the participants. To provide structure for the focus group discussions, the moderator used a discussion guide (see Appendix B). The discussions started with general ideas of what makes a company attractive, followed by the moderator going through the visual stimuli with guided questions that kept the discussion going. The focus group discussions lasted between 25-40 minutes due to the limited possibility of taking up too much time from the students as the focus group discussions took place during free-period hours. However, even for the shorter interviews, the time was sufficient to discuss all the intended topics. The participants answered more in-depth than anticipated and therefore the discussions took less time than what was expected beforehand by the moderators.

The discussions were audio-recorded. Since we were two persons conducting this study, one was moderating the conversation and one was taking notes. Taking notes is necessary especially in a focus group discussion because of the many participants and the complexity it brings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This included keeping track of who said what and collecting thoughts to follow up with questions. The notes were also helpful for the transcription process as the focus group participants often referred to the examples in the visual stimulus material with comments like “I think I prefer that one” while pointing to an example. The one taking notes could then ensure what particular example the participant was referring to.

The transcriptions were made manually and the work was divided between both authors, meaning we transcribed two discussions each. However, when going through the material once again (See Reviewing Themes), the authors went through each other's transcriptions. For the participants to remain anonymous their names have been replaced with pseudonyms, which were kept track of in a separate document. Keeping track of each individual's data is important since a participant is entitled to withdraw during the time of the research. This way, their data could be removed from the data set should such a request occur. However, complete anonymity in focus groups is not possible since the participants will know who the other participants are (Clark et al., 2021).

Data Analysis

In the first step of the data analysis, the audio-recorded group discussions were transcribed manually. Later, the transcripts were uploaded to the software for qualitative data analysis NVivo 14 (Lumivero, 2023) for further analysis and to create codes for the transcripts. The codes were created through inductive coding (Hennink et al., 2020). The results were analyzed through a reflexive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021), focusing on what the participants perceived as important regarding companies' communication for evaluating themes they expressed to be of value for a future employer.

Since the authors and the participants in this study were Swedish, the interviews were conducted in Swedish. To avoid translation mistakes that could affect the analysis, the transcriptions were made in Swedish as well (Hennink et al., 2020). We did the translation during the data dissemination, meaning that only quotes for presenting and discussing results have been translated into English (Gawlewicz, 2019). All English translations and original quotes in Swedish are presented in the footnotes in the findings section and in Appendix D.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a method for analyzing data by identifying and creating themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Reflexive thematic analysis highlights the involvement of the researchers and the subjectivity is viewed as a resource for the analysis rather than a weakness (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The prior knowledge of the researchers will affect the analysis, which according to Braun and Clarke (2021) is what will increase the quality of the analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) have outlined a phase-approached model that contains the following steps: 1) familiarization with the data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing the report. As mentioned by Braun and Clarke (2021), this is not necessarily an approach that needs to be followed phase by phase in chronological order, instead, we have worked back and forth between the phases. For example, we chose to define and name themes after producing the report. Therefore we have removed the numbers of each phase, and instead present them in the order in which we worked along the lines of.

Familiarization with the Data

The familiarization phase is the first phase before creating themes, where one gets to know the data set by actively engaging with it (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As both of the authors conducting the study were present during the focus group discussions, the familiarization started during the data collection. The discussions were audio recorded and later transcribed manually, which, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), is a way of further familiarization of the material. The transcriptions were discussed and further developed with the help of notes taken during the focus group discussions. We used the online tool Miro to start dissecting the data and looking for common themes that had been brought up by the participants. Miro is a tool that works like an online bulletin board, using graphics similar to Post-it notes (Miro, 2024). This helped us get a better visual representation of the collected data corpus.

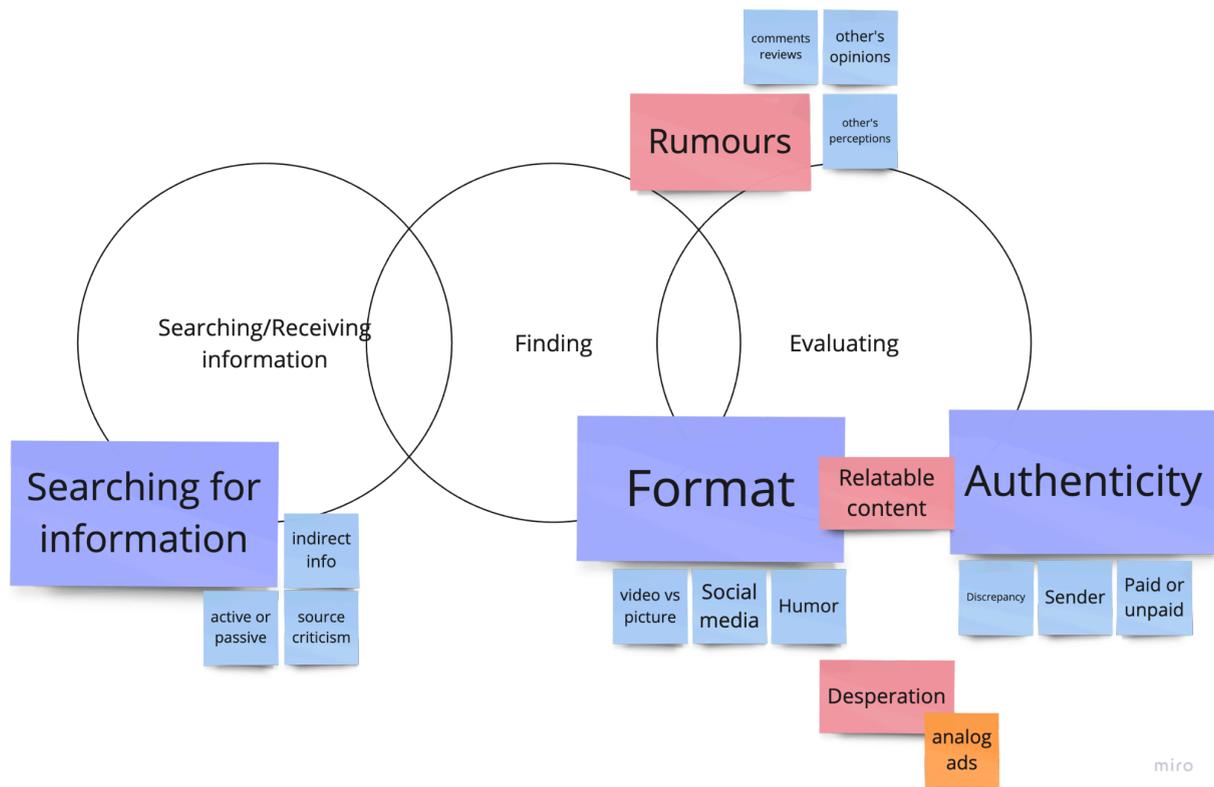
Generating Initial Codes

Using Miro when getting familiarized with the data in the initial phase provided some ideas for initial codes. Creating codes is used for organizing the data set and understanding what topics are recurring and of most importance (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding was conducted in NVivo 14 (Lumivero, 2023), which is a software for analyzing qualitative data. Each transcript was imported to NVivo 14 (Lumivero, 2023) and was once again read through. During this process, data items were coded into different categories, some of which were created beforehand due to the insights gained from the data familiarization phase, and other codes created inductively. Codes are used to identify common attributes within data extracts derived from the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During the focus group discussions, many of the participants were talking about topics that could be interpreted into different codes. The data extracts were then added to all the codes in which they applied, resulting in some overlap. An example of this is when a participant compared social media and a company's website. In that case, the data extract was added into both the code “Social media” and “Website”.

Searching for Themes

This phase is about clustering codes into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend using visual tools during this phase to sort codes into themes. After the coding phase, we returned to Miro to create themes. The initial themes were created through a mind map (see Figure 1), to get a picture of which codes shared similar characteristics and therefore could be clustered together. While searching for themes we prioritized keeping the research questions of this study at the center to be able to answer them properly. The initially created themes were the following: searching and receiving information; format; and authenticity.

Figure 1. Mind Map.



Note: The mind map was used during phase 3 to search for and create initial themes. The main themes overlap in the figure because they were sometimes not mutually exclusive, and some extracts could be coded into multiple codes.

Reviewing Themes

When reviewing the themes, we went through all the data again, including listening to the recorded discussions and reading the transcriptions. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), there are two levels of review one needs to consider involving both the coded data and the data set hence why such a thorough review of the data was made. The first level of reviewing involved going through the data extracts put into codes. After that, we ensured that the data extracts were still coherent and relevant before moving on to the next level, where the entire data set was considered to ensure validity. Based on this review of the data extracts as well as the entire data set, the themes were still appropriate and captured the essence of the most important topics that were brought up and discussed by the participants. Additionally, when we listened through the audio-recorded group discussions again, we counted exactly

how many participants said what and to what extent they agreed with certain statements because it affected the significance of the findings.

Producing the Report

Based on the initial themes and codes we started producing the report, which is presented in the findings section below. Relevant quotes from the focus group discussions are used as evidence to highlight the opinions of the participants. During the production of the findings section it became more evident what codes should be clustered together and to define what each theme captured. This brought us to the phase of defining and finalizing the themes described below. Our decision to produce the findings section first was to gain deeper insight into the material.

Defining and Naming Themes

Defining and naming the themes includes determining the overall aspects the themes capture (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes were supposed to capture the essence of what the focus group discussion had discussed, as well as being relevant to answering this study's research questions. To understand how Gen Z perceive and evaluate information from companies, one needs to understand how they search for or receive information and which type of content they prefer. Lastly, for evaluating the information, their perception of authenticity and trustworthiness is important to answer our research questions. Therefore, the final themes are; Searching for and Receiving Information; Preferred Content; and Authenticity and Trustworthiness. The complete list of themes and sub-themes can be found in Table 2 in the findings section.

Ethical Considerations

The study did not investigate any sensitive personal data such as political opinions, sexual orientation, or ethnicity that need to be considered in advance (IMY, 2023). However, by doing interviews, there is always the possibility that the participants will bring

up sensitive topics without our knowledge. To protect the participants' integrity, personal data such as real names, jobs, and personal relationships, were not used for the analysis.

A combined information letter and consent form (see Appendix C) were used to inform potential participants about the study and to document their agreement to take part in the study. The document informed the participants of the study, and how the data was going to be collected and handled. The information and consent form was further explained verbally before starting the discussions, and they could refuse to answer questions they were not comfortable with. Even though the participants were above 18 and therefore legally considered adults, the study was conducted with young Swedish participants, therefore these documents were written in Swedish and adapted to the age group to avoid formulations that could lead to misunderstandings. How the data was going to be collected and handled was explained to the participants, as the process of conducting academic research might not be familiar to them.

Translations in qualitative research could have ethical concerns due to the potential of misrepresentation of the participants' opinions if the translated outcomes differentiate too much from their original meaning (Gawlewicz, 2019). The role of the researchers' assumptions can come to play a part when translating. To avoid this, we aimed for a literal word-by-word translation (Gawlewicz, 2019). However, when and if necessary, for it to make more sense for the reader, adaptations to formulations had to be made. For example, unnecessary filler words such as “like”, and “you know”, or sections when they went off topic or talked about things that were not of interest to this study, were removed.

The Issue of Subjectivity

The prior knowledge of the researchers will affect the analysis, according to Braun and Clarke (2021). From reading the previous research included in the literature review, we have a preconceived notion and expectation of what the results of this study could turn out to be. We

have worked actively to avoid formulating leading questions with built-in implicit assumptions. However, since our previous knowledge could affect the questions asked and the process of analyzing the findings, we went through the material and analysis several times to avoid interpretations that were not representative of the focus group discussions. When we thought we knew our material, we went through everything again.

However, we believe our preconceived knowledge of the topics discussed made it easier for us to understand the participants and their worldviews. According to Braun and Clarke (2021) it is beneficial with prior knowledge and familiarity with the subject. It is a strength to be able to discern what is relevant, new, or recurring.

Disclosure of the Use of AI in the Writing Process

The idea and inspiration for this section came from Kristian Norling (2024) and his doctoral dissertation. With the rise of AI tools comes a greater ethical responsibility for the researcher to show full disclosure and transparency in the use of these tools. We used ChatGPT 3.5 as a tool for synonyms, inspiration, increased coherence, and readability. For example, when we got stuck on a word or a saying, or when we wanted to enhance our writing. The reasoning for the usage of ChatGPT is that it excels in understanding context. We also used Grammarly (free version) to improve grammar, spelling, and flow. When using these tools, we always conducted a thorough review and editing of the content and we acknowledge full responsibility for the thesis.

Having elaborated on the method employed in this study, we now transition to the findings section, where we present the outcomes and insights from our focus group discussions. Through a reflexive thematic analysis and interpretation of the generated data, we will later move on to answer the research questions of this study in the discussion section.

Findings

The 19 participants (see Table 1 for details) came from two different schools and three different programs. They were all approaching the end of their studies, the last year of Swedish high school, and were therefore reflecting and thinking about the future. The participants were all born in 2005, and at the time of the interviews, they were either 18 or 19 years old. This age group spends a lot of time on their phones and on social media – 98% of Swedish people born during the 00s use social media daily (Internetstiftelsen, 2023). From the focus group discussions, we concluded that this is also true for the participants in this study. The most commonly mentioned social media platforms in the discussions were TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. One person explicitly mentioned that they do not use social media at all, and two others mentioned that they do not use TikTok in particular. However, which platforms were preferred differed across groups and between individuals, especially in the context of perceiving and evaluating information regarding potential future employers. Even so, this gives us a good idea of what kind of digital landscape the participants are living in. This will be further elaborated below.

The findings presented in this section result from the four focus group discussions we conducted. Codes and themes have been identified through a reflexive thematic analysis described in the method section. Because of the nature of focus group discussion and its free-flowing form many of the discussions overlapped between different themes. Therefore, distinctions between the themes and sub-themes have sometimes been blurry and are not mutually exclusive.

The themes are (see Table 2); searching for and receiving information, preferred content, and authenticity and trustworthiness. Sub-themes such as actively or passively receiving information, indirect information, reputation and personal relationships, visual

versus written information, excessively advertising, social media and influencers, and humorous and relatable content will be brought up.

Table 2

Themes and Sub-Themes

Theme	Subtheme
	Actively or passively receiving information
Searching for and receiving information	Indirect information Reputation and personal contacts
Preferred content	Visual versus written Excessively advertising Social media and influencers Humorous and relatable content
Authenticity and trustworthiness	<i>No subtheme</i>

Note: The table displays the finalized themes and sub-themes in the order of the presentation of the findings section. The in-depth process can be found in the method section.

Searching for and Receiving Information

To understand how Gen Z perceive and evaluate the attractiveness of future employers based on the brand's communication and actions we first had to find out how they gather information about companies. In this theme, how information is gathered by the participants is reflected upon. During the discussions, it was clear that the participants used different strategies for actively searching for information and passively scrolling (repeatedly described in terms of “anything can come up”).

Actively or Passively Receiving Information

From the focus group discussions, it became clear that gathering information regarding companies' attractiveness can be done by actively searching or passively receiving information in different formats (more about formats below). A comment made by Felicia in

Discussion Group 2 described these two ways of actively searching for or passively receiving information: “TikTok is a good way to reach people because we are on it [the platform] every day and anything [content/information] can come up (...) for websites, you have to actively choose to search for information.”¹ All groups expressed the necessity of having some prior knowledge about a company to actively put in the effort of searching for information regarding work opportunities and attractiveness as an employer. Examples that were mentioned as actively searching for information about a company were by doing so through Google or looking for information on the company’s website. It was also common to search for other people's opinions on blogs, internet forums, reviews, and comments on social media posts. A passive way of receiving information was characterized by scrolling on, most commonly, social media, but could also include billboards and other advertisements – both analog and digital. The participants frequently expressed this kind of receiving information as characterized by a feeling of not looking for specific information but encountering it regardless. All participants in Discussion Group 2 agreed on TikTok as a platform where information “comes to you”.

However, it was mentioned by a majority of the participants across all discussion groups that they use social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube to actively search for information regarding companies, especially to receive “unofficial” information, and learn more about the employees.

Indirect Information

Indirect information was mentioned by the participants as a deciding factor when forming an opinion about a company. It was not the specific message the company was communicating, instead, participants in the focus groups stated that indirect information was

¹ TikTok når ut mest för det är man inne på varje dag, det kan komma upp vad som helst medan typ såhär hemsidor måste man aktivt gå in och kolla på för att hitta.

gathered through visuals of the workplace and the people, most commonly through pictures and videos. Petra in Discussion Group 4 put it like this: “Images, video, and sound, and such can evoke a stronger feeling for the company than text can do.”² This strengthens the case for the importance of indirect information gained through social media content, such as pictures and videos.

The working culture, group dynamics, and overall relationships at work were agreed upon as important factors by all the participants across all four groups. A few participants tried to find information about the work culture by searching on the company website, but the majority of the participants preferred and found it more effectively displayed through indirect information on social media. It was mentioned in all of the discussion groups that this type of information can be gathered effectively through content on social media. The type of content referred to was seeing employees interact with each other in a seemingly natural context.

This also included what the workplace looks like. Through visual content uploaded on social media, either from an individual or a company, participants across all discussion groups believed they could gain an understanding of the work culture, the surroundings, and the location of the company – all aspects that were mentioned as important when considering a future employer. It can potentially make the difference between applying for a job or not. The importance of indirect information is displayed in this comment made by Klara in Discussion Group 3:

For me, the office environment plays a very important role in how the workplace looks, not just how people are but also that it looks clean and tidy. If you're going to a place every day, you want it to look nice. So, that's probably also the reason why videos like this [referring to Example 3, Appendix A] might influence you, because if it looks nice, cozy, and pleasant, then you think it's a nice place to go to as well.³

² Bilder, video och ljud och sånt kan ju få en att känna mer en känsla för företaget än vad en text kan göra.

³ För mig spelar kontorsmiljön väldigt stor roll, inte bara hur folk är utan också att det ser fräscht och bra ut, man vill ju gärna att om man ska gå till en plats varje dag liksom, vill man ju att det ska se trevligt ut, så det är väl

The visual content of employee interactions and office environments was influential according to all groups, as it provided insight into the workplace atmosphere and surroundings. It became clear from the following conversation in Discussion Group 3 that indirect information impacted the perceptions of a company and the likelihood to apply for a job. This sub-theme was coherently agreed upon within all groups.

Reputation and Personal Relationships

According to several of the participants, reputation and others' opinions of a company played an important role when evaluating and forming opinions about an employer. It was a recurring topic in all four discussion groups. This included word of mouth from friends and family as well as user-generated content on social media. No more than four out of 19 participants attested to either not caring at all or rarely considering rumors or others' opinions.

A minority of the participants used reviews to form their opinions. Especially Carolina, from Discussion Group 1, described how she turned to review websites, blogs, and forums online to consider others' opinions about different companies. Other ways the participants heard rumors and others' opinions included talking to personal contacts in real life, such as parents, relatives, siblings, and friends. A majority of the participants also mentioned that they get influenced by rumors and opinions through the content of Influencers, who sometimes could be perceived as if they were a friend. We will return to the topic of influencers below where we will present how the respondents evaluated the trustworthiness of different key actors and formats in greater detail.

The importance of rumors and the opinions of others were displayed in comments and discussions such as this, mentioned by Gabriella, Discussion Group 2: "One hears a lot from friends and such. And on social media."⁴ Tyra in Discussion Group 4 was strongly preferring

också anledningen till att såna här videos (hjärtvideon) kanske påverkar en, att om det ser fint och mysigt och trevligt ut, då tänker man att det är en trevlig plats att gå till också.

⁴ Man hör ju mycket från vänner och sånt. Och även social media.

personal contacts: "[I prefer] contacts, 100%."⁵ Petra, also from Discussion Group 4, agreed and said: "What plays a big part for me when applying for a job is what other people have said [about the workplace]."⁶ As expressed by Julia, Discussion Group 3:

Some companies really excel at advertising themselves, but then they don't quite practice what they preach. I mean, they claim to be so pleasant, so nice, and so great, but then there's no one I know who's worked there who actually enjoys it, and that weighs much heavier than any fancy advertisement.⁷

Comments and reviews were commonly searched for regarding information about companies as well. 'Comments' refer to the comment section on social media posts from other users on the platform, meanwhile, reviews are usually on websites including a scale of 1-5 and often with a comment as well. The use of reviews and comments to find information was frequently mentioned in all four discussion groups. Eight out of 19 participants explicitly said that they use reviews and comments regularly, while three other participants were skeptical of whether they would use something like a comment section for this purpose.

The comment sections on social media platforms were a common source of information to deepen the understanding of something online, especially on TikTok and YouTube. The majority of the participants used comment sections to form their opinions. One participant described how she often read the comment section on TikTok to gather more information about the subject discussed in the TikTok. By doing so, she thought she got a more nuanced picture than solely trusting the content by itself. Several of the participants agreed that one could get a better understanding of what it would be like to work for a company with the combination of the content and the comment section. Denise, Discussion Group 1, said:

⁵ Kontakter 100%.

⁶ Det som spelar mest roll för vad jag har sökt och så är vad människor har sagt.

⁷ Ja vissa företag gör ju väldigt bra reklam för sig, men så lever dom inte riktigt som lär, alltså dom säger att det är så trevligt, så fint och så bra men sen så är det ingen man känner som jobbat som trivs och det väger ju tyngre än någon snygg reklam som man ser.

[...] I like to check the comments. You watch a video and it's all like 'Oh, it's so great,' [the company] but then you look at the comments and everyone's just like 'No, it sucks, you earn 60 SEK per hour.'⁸

However, the discussion followed with both the participants who were prone to read the comment section and the ones skeptical about it being critical of the comment sections as well, as they believed people with negative opinions were more likely to comment.

Preferred Content

In this theme, which type of content was perceived as most attractive by the participants is presented. The theme includes sub-themes such as the preference for visual content, different platforms, who the sender of the message is, and the usage of humor in employer branding.

Visual Versus Written

To illustrate the sub-theme of visual versus written content, Alba in Discussion Group 1, reflected upon the preference for visual content when forming an opinion:

You want to know more about the work tasks as well (...) and I usually check their website for that information, but it is usually not good, it is just promotional [marketing] content, and you cannot find out how it really is. I would have liked to see a video of what the place really looks like.⁹

A vast majority of the participants mentioned how they perceive and evaluate a company by getting an impression and a "feeling". To get this impression, visual content such as pictures, and videos were addressed as factors that could increase the participants' understanding of working for that particular company. Moreover, several participants from

⁸ Jag gillar att kolla kommentarer, därför videon brukar ofta vara såhär 'åh det är så bra' och så kollar man kommentarerna och alla är bara så 'nej', typ på företag var det så, alla kommentarerna var så 'nej det suger, man tjänar 60 kr i timmen'.

⁹ Men sen vill man ju veta då om arbetsuppgifterna också (...) men jag kollar i såna fall på hemsidan bara och det är inte så bra ofta, alltså det är verkligen bara så säljigt, och så får man inte alls reda på hur det verkligen är. Man hade velat se så en video på hur det ser ut typ.

different discussion groups expressed that it is more difficult to get an authentic impression of the company if the information is presented in written form, such as text on the company's website or a long caption in social media posts. By getting information through text only, the participants expressed not getting a thorough understanding of what the company would be like to work for. When viewing the example in the stimulus material of website information about a company (see example 7, Appendix A), a few of the participants discussed it as something the company writes to be perceived as more attractive. As Hanna, Discussion Group 2, said about the website: "This feels the least appealing to me, seeing that I only think 'Whatever, that is just something they write to sound good'".¹⁰

The discussions revolved around which format is perceived as the most genuine, and that all information shared from a company is believed to be somewhat embellished. However, content such as seemingly unstaged employee-generated videos in the work environment appeared more genuine than brand-generated, written information. The reasoning for preferring visual content over written content was the participants' conclusion that it is trickier to stage visual content of the office than highlighting the company's positive qualities in written content.

Excessively Advertising

Interestingly, without being brought up as an example by the moderators, advertisements in public places such as posters on public transportation or the street were discussed with differentiating opinions. Two of the 19 participants from different discussion groups explicitly said that companies came across as desperate for employees when they perceived the amount of advertisements to be overwhelming. A third participant, Carolina in Discussion Group 1, shared the other twos' opinion and expressed it by saying:

¹⁰ Det där känns minst lockande, det där tänker man ju bara 'jaja ni skriver ju bara så för att låta bra'.

But if there's an excessive amount of advertising for a company, then it feels like, what do you want, like, why do you need so much advertising if you're so good, why aren't there people working there who have friends or contacts who also want to apply there, why do you need to reach out to so many others, but at the same time, it's good to know that they exist, but when it becomes so excessively much, it feels like a warning sign.¹¹

When referring to the feeling of desperation of companies, another participant agreed with Carolina in that she believed an excessive amount of advertisements meant there was a general lack of interest in working for the company. This was mentioned especially in the context of large campaigns on public transportation and in the general public space. An excessive amount of advertisement regarding e.g. recruitment could induce a feeling of staff shortage, desperation, and low status. Siri from Discussion Group 4 said that too much advertising about the same thing can result in the opposite of what the company wants to achieve:

I also thought about if there are ads at bus stops and such, then I feel it can have a bit of the opposite effect because it feels a bit desperate. Didn't you have any other way to reach people than to put up ads on the street. It feels a bit like you don't want to work there because maybe there is (...) staff shortage, that it will become stressful or that you get more negative feelings.¹²

However, that excessive advertising has a negative impact was not mutually agreed upon in the discussion groups. The positive aspect of using advertisements in public places

¹¹ Men typ om det är överdrivet mycket reklam för ett företag, då känns det så, vad vill ni, liksom, varför behöver ni så mycket reklam om ni är så bra, liksom varför är det inte folk som jobbar där som har kompisar eller kontakter som också vill söka dit, varför behöver ni liksom sträcka ut er till så många andra, men samtidigt så är det ju bra att man får reda på att dom finns, men när det blir så överdrivet mycket så känns det lite så varningsflagga.

¹² Sen tänkte jag också på om det är annonser på busshållplatser och så, då tycker jag att det kan få lite motsatt effekt för det känns lite för desperat. Hade ni inga andra sätt att nå folk än att ni måste sätta upp på gatan. (...) Det känns lite som att man inte vill jobba där för det kanske är så mycket personalbrist att det kommer bli stressigt eller att man får de känslorna mer.

that were mentioned by a few of the participants was that it is something they notice. Therefore, they could find out about the existence of a company they did not know about before. Noah in Discussion Group 3 brought up advertisements in public settings as something positive and more professional than advertisements on social media:

Yeah, so if you see a police advertisement on the tram, it feels more genuine than seeing a video on TikTok because you know how TikTok works. Even though it looks enticing that they're filming how it looks and how it works, it feels more credible outside of platforms like TikTok and Instagram.¹³

This is an example of contrasting opinions and different perspectives between participants. Two groups mentioned the sub-theme of excessive advertising as something affecting their perception of a company negatively, meanwhile, the other two groups did not reflect on the amount of advertisement.

Social Media and Influencers

In this section, we will present what the participants discussed as preferred social media platforms and how influencers can play a role in forming their opinions regarding companies. As presented under searching for and receiving information, social media were mentioned by several participants as platforms where they receive a lot of information and content. The dominating platform used by the participants in this study was TikTok. TikTok contains short-form video content, which almost all of the participants expressed as something that usually caught their attention, especially when there was something humorous included in the video.

However, all the participants did not fully agree that TikTok was the best social media platform for brands to reach out to them as an audience. To search for information about a company to investigate if it would be an attractive future workplace, three of the 19

¹³ Ja men så om man ser en polisreklam, på spårvagnen, känns det mer äkta än att se en video på tiktok för att man vet ju hur TikTok funkar. Även om det ser lockande ut att dom filmar hur det ser ut och hur det går till, känns det mer trovärdigt utanför typ tiktok och instagram.

participants across different discussion groups instead preferred looking at the company's Instagram accounts with content containing pictures and text. Two participants, from different discussion groups, explicitly mentioned YouTube as a good platform for learning more about a company as the videos are longer and contain more information, something several other participants seemed to agree with as well.

For social media overall, the vast number of participants believed that a lot of people are tired of the embellished version of what is posted, which could be phrased as content being "Instagrammable"¹⁴, as Siri from Discussion Group 4 put it. The concept is usually used about venues, environments, or even food that looks pretty, meaning it will make for a great picture without necessarily being as good as it looks.

Siri continued to develop her thoughts by expressing how images, and sometimes posts, on social media were a good way to create awareness and to easily discover new companies. When talking about this, the participants from Discussion Group 4 mentioned that less staged content was something they preferred and encouraged in social media content. When discussing perceived staged content, influencers were brought up in another group, it was put like this by Lina, Discussion Group 3:

I'd rather choose other sources than a paid collaboration. You know they've been paid to write these positive things, so they paint a somewhat better picture of it, even though all ads work that way.¹⁵

However, several participants from other groups talked about influencers positively and consumed their content regardless of whether it was a paid collaboration or not. The majority of participants did to some extent consume influencer content and admitted that they sometimes did not even take notice that the content could be an advertisement or influence their behavior and attitudes. Especially, if they followed the influencer (or YouTuber)

¹⁴ Instagramvänligt

¹⁵ Ja man eller jag i alla fall väljer ju hellre andra källor än ett betalt samarbete, man vet ju att den har fått betalt för att skriva de här goda grejerna, så dom gör ju en lite bättre bild av det också även om alla reklamer funkar så.

primarily for entertainment, the participants reflected upon how they might not notice that the companies shown could influence their opinions about them. Noah, Discussion Group 3, mentioned one YouTuber he followed who had a collaboration with Chalmers University of Technology that he perceived as trustworthy as he liked the YouTuber who had previously been a student at Chalmers. In this case, he watched the YouTube video for entertainment, however, he expressed that he was influenced by the collaboration.

Humorous and Relatable Content

The content preferred by the majority of participants was social media posts that were perceived as spontaneous, meaning that they did not appear to be in a staged setting, which often featured a relatable or humorous perspective on working for a particular company. One example of this brought up by Petra in Discussion Group 4 was when a cashier reenacts a funny situation with a customer commonly occurring. She continued to develop this by saying: “It's better when there's a bit of humor in it and not just 'this is what that person [the employee] thinks,' but rather adding some amusing twist that still conveys the same message but in a more entertaining manner.”¹⁶

Seeing people similar to yourself, especially people close in age, having a good time at the workplace was mentioned as a positive factor by Beata from Discussion Group 1 as the content is more relatable and therefore increases interest in the company as a potential future workplace. 17 of the 19 participants explicitly expressed a preference for content created by employees posted on personal accounts rather than having the company as a sender of the message. In all of the four discussion groups examples of either a Swedish woman working for Spotify in New York or two guys working for ByggMax were mentioned as fun content the participants had come across which got their attention on TikTok. Especially the content

¹⁶ Det får gärna vara lite humor i det och inte bara ‘såhär tycker den personen’ utan mer att man gör någon rolig tvist på det som ändå får fram samma budskap men på ett lite underhållande sätt.

from ByggMax that was based on fun relatable sketches about situations that can occur in the workplace, which the participants discussed as something they thought would enhance the attractiveness of working for that company. The woman in New York was not mentioned as being humorous, but instead relatable, and honest. It was agreed upon in all the discussion groups that employee-generated content made the company seem more attractive because the creators were not told to post the content by the company, at least not to the knowledge of the participants. Instead, they showed the companies in a good light without apparent incentives from their respective employers. As Rebecca in Discussion Group 4 put it: “But if it's not their job, like [the guys] at ByggMax, then it's more like they're doing it because they think it's fun and then it's more genuine.”¹⁷ This comment sums up the importance the majority of the participants put on humorous and relatable content, which is also generated by employees or personal users rather than official communication from the company. The reasoning behind the differentiation made between senders was because of the varying levels of genuineness and authenticity, as Rebecca briefly mentioned above. The theme of authenticity and trustworthiness is further discussed in the next section.

Authenticity and Trustworthiness

When evaluating the authenticity and trustworthiness of information about a company as a future employer two factors seemed to be of most value for the participants; who is the sender? and do they get paid? The sender gained a higher level of trustworthiness and authenticity if the information was seen to come from an individual rather than a company, for example. It was perceived as even more authentic if it was an unpaid endorsement of a brand. Due to the Swedish advertisement laws on social media, a paid advertisement needs to be marked clearly if it is made in collaboration with a company (Konsumentverket, 2023). When

¹⁷ Men om de inte har det som arbetsuppgift, som typ på ByggMax, då är det ju mer att de gör det för att de tycker att det är kul och då ser man att det är mer ärligt.

a post was not marked as an advertisement, the majority of participants attested to interpreting the content as the sender's genuine opinion about the matter.

A few of the participants speculated that the more paid a person got for advertising the more inauthentic it was perceived to be, however, monetary compensation is often not official information. Frequently reflected upon by the participants was the huge amount of money that can be involved in paid advertisements and that it had an effect on how trustworthy they perceived the information to be. "You know that it could involve huge sums as well, so it decreases the credibility because you know they're being paid to say good things about the company,"¹⁸ said Mirjam from Discussion Group 3.

However, when continuing the discussion, it was admitted by several participants that there are exceptions where paid collaborations with influencers had a positive effect. If they felt that they had developed trust for an influencer and their character, the participants expressed a higher likelihood of relying on the influencer's opinion. "It's almost like you have some kind of relationship with the person [the influencer], it's not just some random actor or something"¹⁹, said Beata, Discussion Group 1. Julia, Discussion Group 3, expressed "Influencers affect you much more than you think probably. But concerning topics like jobs and education I don't think I would consider an influencer's opinion, at least not knowingly. They are not who I look up to in that area of my life".²⁰

Another aspect that was considered regarding the authenticity of a message was whether it was explicitly sent from a company, e.g. an official account on social media, or if an individual at a company was registered as the sender. Employee-generated content that did not appear to be created with encouragement from the company was perceived as more authentic,

¹⁸ Man vet ju att det kan röra sig om jättestora summor också, så det minskar ju trovärdigheten, eftersom man vet att de blir betalda för att säga bra saker om företaget.

¹⁹ Då får man ju nästan lite, ja men ändå en relation till människan, än om det bara är någon random skådespelare typ.

²⁰ Influencers påverkar en ju mycket mer än vad man tror, men i ämnen kring jobb och utbildning tror jag inte, i alla fall medvetet, hade vägt in en influencers åsikt, för det är inte dom förebilderna jag ser som inom det området liksom.

according to the majority of the participants. However, offline word of mouth, rumors, and personal relationships were ranked higher among all the participants. As expressed by Julia in Discussion Group 3:

If you know it's someone you trust, someone with good values in general and who is a sensible person, then that person's opinion carries much more weight than someone who knows someone, who knows someone. It's a lot about who's saying something, and the better you know someone, the heavier their opinion weighs.²¹

For information from a company to be perceived as authentic, several participants across different discussion groups consistently discussed the problem of glorified marketing and that companies fail to meet their expectations. The participants then compared the information from the advertisement to what they had heard or seen from other sources to evaluate the authenticity and trustworthiness.

The most reliable source was believed to be people they have a personal relationship with in real life, however, appealing marketing that catches attention was perceived to be a good way of increasing the brand's attractiveness. The most important thing was that the rumors and the marketing content were consistent with each other.

Summary of Findings

The participants actively sought, as well as passively received, information about potential future employers through various means. Indirect information was valued and obtained through visuals, such as photos and videos from the workplace, which provided insights into the company culture. Personal relationships and reputation were influential factors in forming opinions about potential future employers, with word of mouth and social

²¹ Ja men absolut, om man vet att det är en person som man vet att man litar på, som man vet har bra värderingar i allmänhet och är en vettig person, så väger den personens åsikt mycket tyngre än någon som känner någon, som känner någon. Det handlar mycket om vem det är som säger något och desto bättre man känner någon desto tyngre väger deras åsikt.

media content as the most important channels. Preferred content on social media included spontaneous and humorous posts, particularly employee-generated content. Visual content was preferred over written information, as it was perceived as being more authentic. Excessive advertising was viewed negatively by some participants, while others found it informative. Influencers also affected participants' perceptions, although there were mixed opinions on their trustworthiness, especially in paid collaborations. Lastly, authenticity and trustworthiness were crucial factors in evaluating information about potential employers, with personal relationships and consistent messages being most important for the participants of this study.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to gain an understanding of Gen Z's perception of what makes a company attractive as a future employer. Throughout this discussion section, the findings of what our participants have discussed as appealing communication from companies will be compared to previous research to answer our research questions on how Gen Zers perceive and evaluate the attractiveness of future employers based on the brand's communication and actions, and the evaluation of authentic and trustworthy communication.

To provide structure, the discussion section is divided into two sub-headings based on the two research questions, and a discussion of the limitations of the study.

Perception and Evaluation of Employer Attractiveness

As brought up in the literature review, employer branding involves companies communicating and directing their advertisement to create a more positive and appealing identity as a brand (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Understanding how company communication is perceived is therefore of importance for companies that wish to excel within this area and be perceived as attractive workplaces. In employer branding, a common strategy is to highlight a company's positive attributes (Kucherov et al., 2022; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). To be perceived as an attractive workplace for Gen Z, it is crucial to understand what they consider as positive attributes. The participants in this study highlighted relationships with superiors and colleagues and an overall positive and appealing work environment as the most important attributes. Effective ways of displaying these attributes were said to be through user-generated content, preferably made and uploaded by employees on their personal accounts rather than posted by the brand's themselves. The results of this study are supported by previous research, stating that Gen Z tends to rely on user-generated content as trustworthy information regarding products or brands (Munsch, 2021). Why the participants showed a

higher interest in the content created by the “normal employee”, was mostly because of the less embellished content and that they do not have the same perceived monetary incentives.

Other information sources the participants often turned to were reviews, word of mouth and online rumors. The opinions of others were perceived to be more authentic and trustworthy than information about the workplace with the company as the sender. This also included personal contacts such as family and friends. The participants in this study expressed that the most reliable source of information was current or former employees as they would have the most knowledge about the workplace. The closer the relationship one has with the employee, the more the participants trusted them with the information. Therefore, the reputation was clearly of importance for the participants. This finding corresponds with Urbancová & Hudáková (2017), as they claim the brand’s reputation is partly formed by current employees by word of mouth.

Interestingly, user-generated content was a way of reviewing products, services, and companies. An online customer review most commonly includes a rating scale and the possibility to leave a comment on a product or a service. A large part of the user-generated content has the character of a review but is presented in another format, it can for example be a video of a person talking about their experience of a company they are or have been working for on social media platforms. To further nuance the perception of a workplace, the participants read user comments on social media content. The participants used the comments as a source of confirmation, to validate the truthfulness of the content. They could, for example, evaluate whether people tended to agree or disagree with the content creator.

The preferred social media platforms by the participants in this study (TikTok, Youtube, and Instagram) were coherent with what previous studies and reports have shown for Gen Z (Munsch, 2021; Internetstiftelsen, 2023). The majority of the participants used and mentioned TikTok, with its short-form video content, as a suitable platform for gaining a better

understanding of what a workplace would be like to work for. Specifically, two content creators were mentioned in different groups as creators of fun and interesting content about their workplace, which got the participants' attention and positively affected their view of the companies. Short videos with humorous elements are effective in capturing Gen Z's attention according to previous research (Munsch, 2021), which our findings also support. Munsch (2021) highlights the difficulty of capturing Gen Z's attention as a problem when trying to reach this part of the population. Our study, in similarity with Munsch's (2021), found that the problem of getting Gen Z's attention can be overcome with a specific kind of content that appeals to the audience. What is appealing content is subjective but understanding the preferences of this target group and executing accordingly can nevertheless be an effective way to practice employer branding. Employer branding should be adapted to current trends and needs to be perceived as credible and authentic to be effective (Urbancová & Hudáková, 2017).

A perception that we had not anticipated brought up by the participants was that the excessiveness of advertisements could make companies come across as desperate. This was not encountered during the literature search for this study and was therefore unexpected. That a company was perceived as desperate when advertising too much was not mutually agreed upon by all the participants, but it did come up in two different groups independent of each other and without involvement from the moderators. The participants mentioned the positive aspect of this type of advertisement as something they noticed and became aware of companies they previously did not know existed. What type of message was advertised was also of concern if it would be perceived as desperate or not. The excessiveness combined with the impression of general and broad requirements for employment increased the perceived desperation. The occurrence of this theme indicates that not only the format of the content is important to take into consideration for companies, but also the amount. The discussion of

excessiveness of advertisement was mostly referring to analog advertisements in public spaces and the participants did not discuss the extent of digital advertisement. This subject is something that would need further investigation, to understand its impact and significance in a broader population.

What Makes a Brand's Communication Authentic and Trustworthy

Andonopoulos et al., (2023) discussed the expressed desire for more authenticity and genuine content on social media, which could be due to the general tiredness of exposure of staged or manipulated content. The findings of our study show that participants agreed with this statement and inquired about more authentic content. This could explain the preference for the “simple” content that the participants showed interest in, where there was not too much effort put into making it Instagrammable, but rather showed the authentic work experience.

The sender of the message was also a factor that was found to affect the authenticity of the message. Andonopoulos et al. (2023), found that for an influencer to be perceived as trustworthy they have to appear authentic and true to their personal brand. Our participants were skeptical about trusting influencers in work-related evaluations, however, if the influencer had personal experience the influencer would be a suitable source for gaining more understanding about the workplace. Audrezet et al. (2020) address that influencer marketing is a powerful way to nudge and influence people, but according to the findings of this study, influencer marketing was not perceived to be as effective as previous research has shown. The participants expressed that they would not rely on an influencer as a primary source for insights on what it would be like to work for a company. Even so, the participants were aware of and reflected on the fact that they could be influenced without noticing when consuming the influencers' content. Overall, the authenticity and trustworthiness of influencers were not something the participants held unanimous views about. Therefore, how influencers can affect

a brand's attractiveness was not something that could be concluded from the findings of this study.

A key finding was the importance of consistency. For a company to be perceived as consistent, what was said about the company has to resemble what the company was communicating about itself. Consistency was of importance for authenticity and trustworthiness, according to the participants of this study. To further evaluate whether a company was consistent or not, the participants turned to different social media platforms and sources of information. This was also reflected in the interest in searching for information on social media channels, where anyone can comment. The participants expressed that the most authentic view of the company probably would be somewhere in the intersection of a company's marketing content and the comment section, and there was a need for both, the embellished content, and the harsh comment section. Too much discrepancy did however decrease the perceived authenticity of a brand.

To summarize, what was found significant through this study was that perceived unstaged, employee-generated content was preferred by the participants. An excessive amount of analog advertisement could decrease the interest of working for a company. The perceived authenticity was affected by monetary incentives, as the authenticity and trustworthiness of a message decreased if the sender could benefit from it, including both companies and influencers. This group of participants all agreed that personal contacts were the most reliable source for the understanding of what it would be like to work for a company. These findings are an interesting contribution to the field of research, however, there are some limitations of this study that we will address now.

Limitations

The participants in this study were a homogeneous group as they all studied theoretical programs in two schools only, and the gender distribution was 89% female and 11% male. In

two of the articles used as background for this study (Lee & Eastin, 2021; Mostafa, 2022) the majority of the participants were women and in three other articles (Kucherov et al., 2022; Munsch, 2021; Pandita, 2021) the gender distribution of the participants went by unmentioned. Borg et al. (2023) had 56% male participants, which was the only article found with more male than female participants. Despite this background, the skewed gender distribution of this study cannot be explained with solid back-up in research and was therefore not speculated about in this study. Whether or not gender has any implications for the findings is something for future research to investigate.

Since focus group discussions are characterized by an open conversation, the moderator has less control over the conversation than in an interview. The conversation could quickly change its course between topics. This made it more challenging for the moderator to follow along with questions and deepening of some topics, as the conversation had already moved on to something else. However, this was the kind of unfiltered and natural conversation we were looking for for this study in order to get the participants' genuine perceptions and opinions. There is also a risk with focus group discussions that participants feel pressured to agree with each other, however, our perception of the discussions was that the participants felt comfortable disagreeing with each other, which also was the case on multiple occasions. Instead, the participants inspired each other with new perspectives, which they sometimes agreed and sometimes disagreed upon. In those cases participants were affected by others' opinions, it was by new perspectives they had not thought about before.

Since we were two persons conducting this study we were able to decrease the risk of missing important topics. It was also easier to ask relevant follow-up questions to provide some structure to an otherwise unstructured discussion. Still, for some statements, the transcription process made us aware of statements that would have been interesting to develop more deeply. The conversations might have been even more elaborated but we assess that it

would not affect the outcome of the study. Additionally, it was sometimes challenging to know how many of the participants agreed or disagreed with a statement if it was not spoken out clearly.

Conclusion

Understanding how Gen Z perceives and evaluates the attractiveness of future employers based on brand communication and actions is crucial for companies seeking to excel in employer branding. This study has given insight into the preferences and perceptions of Gen Z regarding employer branding, shedding light on key factors influencing their perceptions and evaluations.

The participants of this study were inclined to view reviews, word of mouth, and online rumors as reliable sources of information, placing higher trust in the opinions of others, especially current or former employees. Personal contacts were deemed the most dependable, emphasizing the significance of reputation in shaping perceptions of potential employers. Social media platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram were the preferred channels for accessing information about potential employers, with short-form video content capturing their attention. Humorous and relatable content was particularly appealing because it resonated with Gen Z's preferences.

Moreover, the findings highlight the importance of authentic and relatable communication from companies. Participants valued relationships with colleagues and superiors, emphasizing the significance of a pleasant work environment. User-generated content, particularly when created by employees on personal accounts, was preferred over content posted by brands and companies themselves. It can be concluded from the findings of this study that Gen Zers rely on user-generated content for trustworthy information.

An important factor to consider is consistency. Consistency emerged as a key factor because participants sought coherence between a company's marketing content and other peoples' opinions. Too high a discrepancy decreases the perceived authenticity of a brand, and therefore to have a fruitful employer branding strategy it is important to have all employees

onboard and satisfied, as word of mouth communication otherwise can minimize the outcome of the desired perceived attractiveness of a brand.

Unexpectedly, participants noted that excessive advertising could make companies appear desperate, highlighting the importance of balance and, once again, authenticity in employer branding efforts.

In conclusion, authenticity, relatability, and consistency are predominant in shaping Gen Z's perceptions of potential employers. While influencers and traditional advertising channels play a role, user-generated content, and personal connections are of higher significance in influencing opinions. Understanding and adapting to these preferences are essential for companies striving to attract and retain top talent from Gen Z. Companies should prioritize transparency, genuine engagement, and alignment with Gen Z values to enhance their attractiveness as employers in the eyes of this demographic.

Future Research

This study employed qualitative methods to explore the opinions of Gen Z. However, introspective opinions may not always align with actual behavior. Therefore, to validate these findings, future research could employ a quantitative approach conducting experiments to observe the real behavior of Gen Z and assessing any correlation between expressed attitudes and their actions regarding employer branding.

Additionally, since the sample of this study was highly homogenous, it did not allow for the exploration of gender-specific nuances. It would be valuable for future research to investigate these aspects further. Other aspects such as socioeconomic background, ethnic background, industry-specific aspirations, ideology, religion, and values would also nuance the understanding of Gen Z's perception of employer attractiveness.

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Appendix A – Visual Stimuli

Example 1



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jSqZGN4o5i0>

Example 2



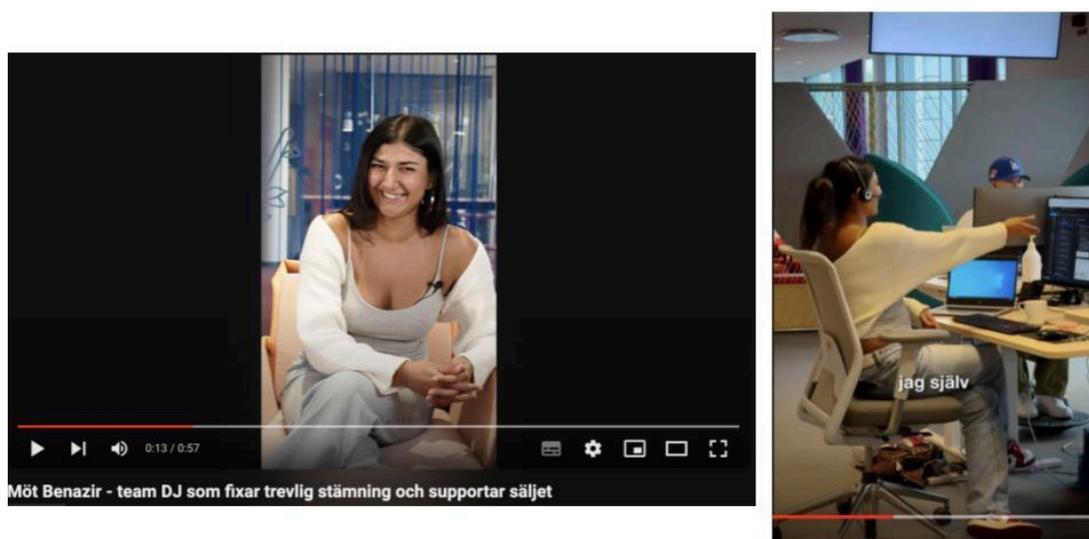
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JRVyAUyfEKI&ab_channel=IKEA

Example 3



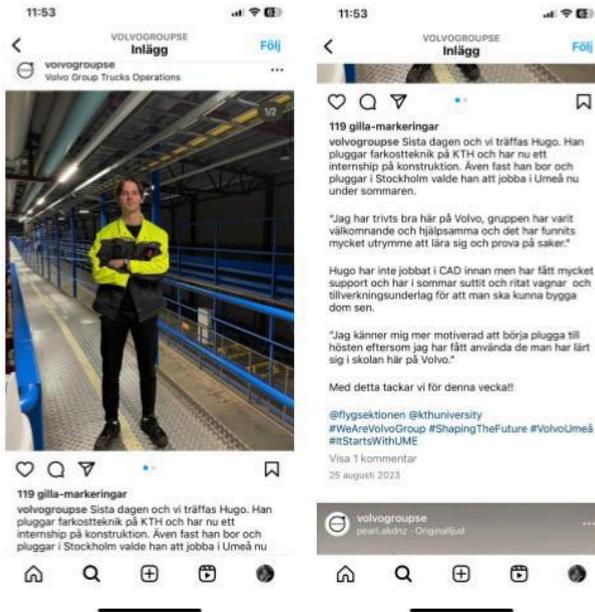
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZGeQ3MWQP/>

Example 4



<https://www.tiktok.com/@livetpa3/video/7300865051123027233>

Example 5



<https://www.instagram.com/p/CwXRSf4onZm/?igsh=ZTQ5Y2JidWljN202>

Example 6

Polisen använde influencer-reklam för sin utbildning – så mycket kostade det



<https://www.breakit.se/artikel/18720/polisen-anvande-influencer-reklam-for-sin-utbildning-sa-mycket-kostade-det>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzBgr30t5yc&ab_channel=Uppdrag%3AMat

Example 7

MONKI

Vi är Monki

Mode är vårt uttrycks sätt och vi har en passion för det. Men det är inte nog med det. Vi vill göra skillnad. Vi vill stärka kvinnor så att de kan stärka världen.

Monki kom till för att det inte fanns något som Monki. Och sedan den dagen har vårt uppdrag varit att ge unga kvinnor över hela världen möjlighet att hylla systerskapet. Både när vi jobbar med social hållbarhet, rätten till sin kropp, mental hälsa, mens, eller helt enkelt nya modetrender, vill vi inspirera alla att uttrycka sin egen unika stil och känna sig värdefulla precis som de är. Vårt mål är att erbjuda ett alternativ genom vår butiksoplevelse, vår signaturstil och vårt engagemang, för att stärka varandra.

Som syftesdrivet varumärke vill vi inte bara bli erkända för våra trendiga kollektioner och systerskapsvärderingar, utan också för vårt djärva hållbarhetsarbete och våra medvetna initiativ. Vi satsar långsiktigt och vi vill gärna ha dig med oss på den här resan.

Vill du vara med och sätta Monki på kartan?

Som en del av Monki-teamet har varje person förmåga att göra skillnad i vår verksamhet, varje dag. Vårt varumärkes-DNA har Modig, Rolig, Snäll och Stärkande inbäddat i allt vi gör, och vi är stolta över att återspegla dessa värderingar inom verksamhetens alla områden. Vi värdesätter unika skilnader, nyfikenhet och djärvhet. Vi uppmanar till att lyssna, lära och undervisa. Monki-teamet är vår superkraft och vi är för alltid starkare tillsammans.

Okej, jag vill vara med. Hur går vi vidare?

Du kan se de aktuella möjligheterna hos oss nedan, och se till att [följa vårt LinkedIn-konto](#) för att hålla dig uppdaterad.



https://www.monki.com/sv_se/about-monki/work-at-monki.html

Example 8

topplista 2023. sveriges mest attraktiva arbetsgivare

- | | |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| 1. Spotify (1) | 14. ABB (17) |
| 2. IKEA (2) | 15. Husqvarna (ny) |
| 3. Sveriges Television (5) | 16. Siemens (ny) |
| 4. Försvarets materielverk (20) | 17. Linköpings universitet (10) |
| 5. AFRY (4) | 18. Tullverket (18) |
| 6. Epiroc (24) | 19. Länsförsäkringar (ny) |
| 7. Volvo Cars (3) | 20. ICA (6) |
| 8. Försvarsmakten (14) | 21. Clas Ohlson (19) |
| 9. Volvo Group (9) | 22. SSAB (ny) |
| 10. EY (11) | 23. Kungliga tekniska högskolan (ny) |
| 11. WSP (15) | 24. Systembolaget (7) |
| 12. Sveriges lantbruksuniversitet (ny) | 25. CGI (ny) |
| 13. Regeringskansliet (16) | |

<https://www.slu.se/globalassets/nyhet-kalend/2023/rebr-2023.pdf>

Appendix B – Discussion Guide

Focus group – Discussion Guide

Talking points before starting:

Go through the consent form

There are no right or wrong answers - not knowing is a result as well

Talk to each other - try to not see this as an interview, but more a conversation among the participants

Structure for discussion:

Background information:

- names, age
- education programme/majors

Have you ever thought about this topic before, how and what makes an organization attractive (reasons why you would like to work there)?

General thoughts and opinions about attractive workplaces

- Do you know what you want to do after you graduate, what you want to work with or for which company?
- What is an attractive workplace for you - what is important for you when choosing a workplace?

Short explanation about employer branding and how companies use communication to enhance their best qualities and marketing in an attempt to increase applicants for job positions.

Following, photo-elicitation showing our examples, and creating a discussion from those

- Do any of these examples stand out to you?
- What caught your attention?

Do you have any examples yourself of a situation or ad that has gotten your attention for a job you were not aware of before?

Based on the things they have addressed as important for them - how do you evaluate that a company has these qualities?

What would make you not apply for a job or a certain company?

How do you evaluate if something an organization communicates is trustworthy or not?

Appendix C – Information-Consent Letter



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

Consent to Participate in Research Down with the kids – How Gen Z perceive employer branding

You have been invited to take part in a research study that's part of the final degree project for the MSc in Communication at the University of Gothenburg. The purpose of the study is to understand how Generation Z perceive and evaluate the attractiveness of future employers based on the brand's communication and actions. In this study we will focus on Swedish high school students, as they are a part of Gen Z. Emma Edström and Alice Gatenheim, under the supervision of Dr. Ylva Hård af Segerstad, Senior lecturer (University of Gothenburg), are conducting the study.

Activities and Time Commitment: If you decide to participate in this project, you will be asked to participate in a focus-group interview. In a group interview, the participants are discussing the topic under the guidance of Alice Gatenheim and Emma Edström. The interview will be conducted in person at a mutually agreed-upon location. Completing the interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes. The study will not investigate any sensitive topics and is not deemed to pose any risk to you as a participant.

Confidentiality and Privacy: The interview will be audio recorded and later transcribed and the data will be stored on secure servers provided by the University of Gothenburg. Alice Gatenheim and Emma Edström will be the only persons who will know the passwords to access the files. Our supervisor and the academic personnel appointed to control the quality of the thesis project will be the only individuals who can require us to gain access to those files for academic research purposes only. The data collected during the study will be deleted after the completion of the thesis project. Your contributions in the focus group interview will be anonymously reported in the thesis. No names or other identifying information will be used when discussing or reporting data.

Voluntary Participation: You can freely choose to take part or not to take part in this study. If you agree to participate, you can withdraw at any time, even after you have participated in the interview, without cause and any collected data will be deleted.

Questions: If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please email Emma Edström (gusedsem@student.gu.se) and/or Alice Gatenheim (gusgatal@student.gu.se). You could also contact our supervisor Ylva Hård af Segerstad (ylva.hard-af-segerstad@ait.gu.se).

By agreeing to sign this consent form, you understand the purpose of this study. Your questions and/or concerns have been answered. You will receive a copy of this consent form for your records.

I agree to participate in the study

I agree to the processing of information about me in the manner described in the information above

Name and last name of the participant: _____ Date _____

The researchers can contact me for further questions after the interview

Mobile: _____ Email: _____

Appendix D – Translation Table

1	TikTok is a good way to reach people because we are on it [the platform] every day and anything [content/information] can come up (...) for websites, you have to actively choose to search for information.	TikTok når ut mest för det är man inne på varje dag, det kan komma upp vad som helst medan typ såhär hemsidor måste man aktivt gå in och kolla på för att hitta.
2	Images, video, and sound, and such can evoke a stronger feeling for the company than text can do.	Bilder, video och ljud och sånt kan ju få en att känna mer en känsla för företaget än vad en text kan göra.
3	For me, the office environment plays a very important role in how the workplace looks, not just how people are but also that it looks clean and tidy. If you're going to a place every day, you want it to look nice. So, that's probably also the reason why videos like this [referring to Example 3, Appendix 3] might influence you, because if it looks nice, cozy, and pleasant, then you think it's a nice place to go to as well.	För mig spelar kontorsmiljön väldigt stor roll, inte bara hur folk är utan också att det ser fräscht och bra ut, man vill ju gärna att om man ska gå till en plats varje dag liksom, vill man ju att det ska se trevligt ut, så det är väl också anledningen till att såna här videos (hjärtvideon) kanske påverkar en, att om det ser fint och mysigt och trevligt ut, då tänker man att det är en trevlig plats att gå till också.
4	One hears a lot from friends and such. And on social media.	Man hör ju mycket från vänner och sånt. Och även social media.
5	[I prefer] contacts, 100%.	Kontakter 100%
6	What plays a big part for me when applying for a job is what other people have said [about the workplace]	Det som spelar mest roll för vad jag har sökt och så är vad människor har sagt.
7	Some companies really excel at advertising themselves, but then they don't quite practice what they preach. I mean, they claim to be so pleasant, so nice, and so great, but then there's no one I know who's worked there who actually enjoys it, and that	Ja vissa företag gör ju väldigt bra reklam för sig, men så lever dom inte riktigt som lär, alltså dom säger att det är så trevligt, så fint och så bra men sen så är det ingen man känner som jobbat som trivs och det väger ju tyngre än någon snygg

	weighs much heavier than any fancy advertisement.	reklam som man ser.
8	[...] I like to check the comments. You watch a video and it's all like 'Oh, it's so great,' [the company] but then you look at the comments and everyone's just like 'No, it sucks, you earn 60 SEK per hour.'	Jag gillar att kolla kommentarer, därför videon brukar ofta vara såhär 'åh det är så bra' och så kollar man kommentarerna och alla är bara så 'nej', typ på företag var det så, alla kommentarerna var så 'nej det suger, man tjänar 60 kr i timmen'.
9	You want to know more about the work tasks as well (...) and I usually check their website for that information, but it is usually not good, it is just promotional [marketing] content, and you cannot find out how it really is. I would have liked to see a video of what the place really looks like.	Men sen vill man ju veta då om arbetsuppgifterna också (...) men jag kollar i såna fall på hemsidan bara och det är inte så bra ofta, alltså det är verkligen bara så säljigt, och så får man inte alls reda på hur det verkligen är. Man hade velat se så en video på hur det ser ut typ.
10	This feels the least appealing to me, seeing that I only think 'Whatever, that is just something they write to sound good'	Det där känns minst lockande, det där tänker man ju bara 'jaja ni skriver ju bara så för att låta bra'.
11	But if there's an excessive amount of advertising for a company, then it feels like, what do you want, like, why do you need so much advertising if you're so good, why aren't there people working there who have friends or contacts who also want to apply there, why do you need to reach out to so many others, but at the same time, it's good to know that they exist, but when it becomes so excessively much, it feels like a warning sign.	Men typ om det är överdrivet mycket reklam för ett företag, då känns det så, vad vill ni, liksom, varför behöver ni så mycket reklam om ni är så bra, liksom varför är det inte folk som jobbar där som har kompisar eller kontakter som också vill söka dit, varför behöver ni liksom sträcka ut er till så många andra, men samtidigt så är det ju bra att man får reda på att dom finns, men när det blir så överdrivet mycket så känns det lite så varningsflagga.
12	I also thought about if there are ads at bus stops and such, then I feel it can have a bit of the opposite effect because it feels a bit desperate. Didn't you have any other way to reach people than to put up ads on the street.	Sen tänkte jag också på om det är annonser på busshållplatser och så, då tycker jag att det kan få lite motsatt effekt för det känns lite för desperat. Hade ni inga andra sätt att nå folk än att ni måste sätta upp på gatan. (...)

	It feels a bit like you don't want to work there because maybe there is (...) staff shortage, that it will become stressful or that you get more negative feelings.	Det känns lite som att man inte vill jobba där för det kanske är så mycket personalbrist att det kommer bli stressigt eller att man får de känslorna mer.
13	Yeah, so if you see a police advertisement on the tram, it feels more genuine than seeing a video on TikTok because you know how TikTok works. Even though it looks enticing that they're filming how it looks and how it works, it feels more credible outside of platforms like TikTok and Instagram.	Ja men så om man ser en polisreklam, på spårvagnen, känns det mer äkta än att se en video på tiktok för att man vet ju hur Tiktok funkar. Även om det ser lockande ut att dom filmar hur det ser ut och hur det går till, känns det mer trovärdigt utanför typ tiktok och instagram.
14	Instagrammable	Instagramvänligt
15	I'd rather choose other sources than a paid collaboration. You know they've been paid to write these positive things, so they paint a somewhat better picture of it, even though all ads work that way.	Ja man eller jag i alla fall väljer ju hellre andra källor än ett betalt samarbete, man vet ju att den har fått betalt för att skriva dom här goda grejerna, så dom gör ju en lite bättre bild av det också även om alla reklamer funkar så.
16	It's better when there's a bit of humor in it and not just 'this is what that person [the employee] thinks,' but rather adding some amusing twist that still conveys the same message but in a more entertaining manner.	Det får gärna vara lite humor i det och inte bara 'såhär tycker den personen' utan mer att man gör någon rolig tvist på det som ändå får fram samma budskap men på ett lite underhållande sätt.
17	But if it's not their job, like [the guys] at ByggMax, then it's more like they're doing it because they think it's fun and then it's more genuine.	Men om de inte har det som arbetsuppgift, som typ på ByggMax, då är det ju mer att de gör det för att de tycker att det är kul och då ser man att det är mer ärligt.
18	You know that it could involve huge sums as well, so it decreases the credibility because you know they're being paid to say good things about the company.	Man vet ju att det kan röra sig om jättestora summor också, så det minskar ju trovärdigheten, eftersom man vet att de blir betalda för att säga bra saker om företaget.
19	It's almost like you have some kind of relationship with the person [the influencer], it's not just some random actor or	Då får man ju nästan lite, ja men ändå en relation till människan, än om det bara är någon random skådespelare

	something	typ.
20	Influencers affect you much more than you think probably. But concerning topics like jobs and education I don't think I would consider an influencers opinion, at least not knowingly. They are not who I look up to in that area of my life	Influencers påverkar en ju mycket mer än vad man tror, men i ämnen kring jobb och utbildning tror jag inte, i alla fall medvetet, hade vägt in en influencers åsikt, för det är inte dom förebilderna jag ser som inom det området liksom.
21	If you know it's someone you trust, someone with good values in general and who is a sensible person, then that person's opinion carries much more weight than someone who knows someone, who knows someone. It's a lot about who's saying something, and the better you know someone, the heavier their opinion weighs.	Ja men absolut, om man vet att det är en person som man vet att man litar på, som man vet har bra värderingar i allmänhet och är en vettig person, så väger den personens åsikt mycket tyngre än någon som känner någon, som känner någon. Det handlar mycket om vem det är som säger något och desto bättre man känner någon desto tyngre väger deras åsikt.

Statement of Division of Work

We are two who have been working on this thesis together. Both of us have been part of all steps in the process, both the theoretical and the practical ones. However, Emma Edström has been putting slightly more effort into the method section, whereas Alice Gatenheim has put somewhat more effort into being responsible for coordinating with the participants. However, in general the workload has been more or less even between the two of us, and we did everything together and met in person every day.