

ATTRACTING MEMBERS OF GENERATION Z TO COMPANIES VIA SOCIAL MEDIA RECRUITING IN GERMANY

Anna Wübbelt

FOM University of Applied Sciences
Germany
ORCID 0000-0002-1020-8193

Henning Tirrel

FOM University of Applied Sciences
Germany
ORCID 0000-0002-4610-3158

Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to analyze the importance of social media in the recruitment of Generation Z, with a focus on their expectations towards social media recruiting. In a qualitative analysis, nine interviews were conducted with members of Generation Z, as well as a focus group discussion with six HR managers. Based on our research sample, both members of Generation Z and recruiters attach great importance to social media recruiting. Members of Generation Z can be characterized by their willingness to use social media, active sourcing, and the talent pool to actively support their job search. The social media platforms Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, XING, and LinkedIn are identified as potential contact points for the generation. However, a discrepancy was uncovered between what HR managers expect in relation to the usage of social media for job searches and the actual passive use of social media for this purpose by Generation Z. In addition, a positive candidate journey and attention to various (passive) touch points are important for successful recruitment of Generation Z members. Due to the open attitude of the generation towards social media recruiting, they need to be made aware of this topic during their candidate journey.*

Keywords: *social media, recruiting, Generation Z, human resource management, candidate journey*



INTRODUCTION

The trend toward publishing vacancies on social network platforms has increased in recent years (Kluemper & Rosen, 2008; Parry & Tyson, 2008). From 2018 to 2019, the percentage of companies using this medium for recruitment purposes rose from 14.3% to 17.0% (Weitzel et al. 2020b). The internet has evolved and adapted to changes and social structures, so that there has been a progression from print ads to digitally placed job ads via social media portals (Dannhäuser & Braehmer, 2017; Klaffke, 2014). This is solely possible due to the shift from web 1.0 to web 2.0 in which interaction and communication between users is possible (Bernauer, Hesse, Laick & Schmitz, 2011). Members of Generation Z (Gen Z) communicate digitally 74% of the time and only 26% in person (Schroth, 2019). A recent study also shows that social network platforms are among the most frequently used channels for job searches by students and trainees (Weitzel et al., 2020b). Recruiting and employer branding must be adapted to the communication behavior of Gen Z for getting in touch with them. In the context of the shortage of skilled workers, changes in social media use and the digital transformation, social media is an important tool for recruiting and actively sourcing new employees in the war for talent (Dannhäuser, 2017; Hesse, Mayer, Rose & Fellingner, 2019). Since members of Gen Z are a scarce but a necessary resource due to demographic change, it is essential for companies to recognize and attract them as future specialists and managers (Klaffke, 2014). At this point, it is particularly worthwhile to use social media channels, as aforementioned.

The present research will fill important theoretical and managerial gaps with regard to social media recruiting of Gen Z members. Some current studies focus on members of this generation in relation to their characteristics, values, and expectations of the world of work (Klaffke, 2014; Kring & Hurrelmann, 2019; Weitzel et al., 2020b; Hurrelmann, Köcher & Sommer, 2019), other studies shed light on the viewpoint of Gen Z (Weitzel et al., 2020a), but no existing study covers differences and similarities between the way they are searching for jobs and how Human Resource Managers (HR managers) expect them to, with a focus on social media. This emphasis was chosen as Gen Z is characterised as technoholics, i.e., they have grown up with technological change, have access to the internet at all times and depend entirely on IT (Redmond, 2013; Parker, Graf & Igielnik, 2019; Seemiller & Grace, 2017). While the term technoholics implies an addiction of technology (Güngör & Alp, 2019), members of Gen Z are also characterized as digital natives, focusing on people growing up with digital change, leading to different patterns of thinking (Prensky, 2001). This concept is also discussed critically for decades (and continues to be discussed) as the understanding of this concept has changed due to the developments of technology (Evans & Robertson, 2019). So, there is no consensus on what the term stands for (Evans & Robertson, 2019). Both concepts imply an affinity to technology which is the focus in this study.

Additionally, this is a generation defined by a high willingness to learn as well as their initiative, and both self-actualisation and a work-life cut is significant for them, meaning that border management comes into play (Krüger, 2019; Hurrelmann et al., 2019).

The aim of our research is to shine a light on this area by analyzing the role of social media in the recruitment of Gen Z members. The focus is on members of Gen Z's and HR managers' expectations regarding social media recruiting as well as on identifying similarities and differences. Therefore, the research question is: "How do members of Gen Z use social media in their job search compared to the actual use of social media in recruiting by HR managers

now and in the future?” This question will be answered as follows: First, a literature review will be conducted; second, semi-structured interviews will be implemented with members of the Gen Z; third, a focus group discussion with six HR managers will be conducted; and fourth, the results will be analyzed and synthesized. In the end, a comparison between the assumptions of HR managers and members of the Gen Z will discuss overlapping and differentiating viewpoints. Finally, theoretical and managerial implications will be presented as well as limitations of this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Generation Z – the future employees

The corresponding birth years of the respective generations are not consistent in the literature and assign different years to the generations (Klaffke 2014; Kring & Hurrelmann, 2019; Krüger, 2019). According to Klaffke (2014), Gen Z is composed of the cohorts born between 1996 and 2010, which are currently on the verge of the employment phase. The use of a smartphone can be seen as their most defining characteristic (Ingold, 2016) while social media are highly important for them, although they are careless and do not take data protection seriously (Hesse & Mattmüller, 2019; Krüger, 2019). In contrast, Abramova, Antonova, Campa and Popova (2022) state that young people are fearful of data security and are causing digital anxiety due to the advancement of technoscience. Regardless of age, one is exposed to social pressure and even the youngest representatives (age of 11) of Gen Z are using social media (Klaffke, 2014). For this reason, more young people are opting for a social media time-out (digital detox), by switching their smartphones off temporarily (Hurrelmann et al., 2019). Parents occupy a particularly high position in the lives of Gen Z as they serve as role models and constant companions in all matters relating to life, career or as financial advisors (Kring & Hurrelmann, 2019). Critically, however, because of this Gen Z struggles to develop independence and is sheltered by parents (Krüger, 2019). Studies have also shown that the aspect of self-actualization is becoming more significant for Gen Z (Hurrelmann et al., 2019; Weitzel et al., 2020b). Furthermore, the working atmosphere, a high level of recognition and self-actualization during work are important for them (Hurrelmann et al., 2019; Ingold, 2016; Klaffke, 2014; Neder & Scheller, 2019). In addition, a large majority of Gen Z considers performance-based pay and a positive work-life balance important (Hurrelmann et al., 2019; Ingold, 2016; Kring and Hurrelmann, 2019; Weitzel et al., 2020a; Neder & Scheller, 2019). Rather, they even expect a work-life cut and want to strictly separate private life from work (Kring & Hurrelmann, 2019). Other gratifications such as a high income and regulated working hours as well as little overtime and low stress are essential (Hurrelmann et al., 2019). Another important factor for Gen Z is a flexible work arrangement through options offered by the company, e.g. home office, because 40% of candidates would otherwise reject a job offer (Weitzel et al., 2020a). Additionally, Gen Z expects fast and honest communication as well as timely feedback (Kring & Hurrelmann, 2019). Summing this up, the following aspects are identified as important for Gen Z: Meaningful work, performance management, work-life balance, personal connection, the big picture at work, learning, and development (Chillakuri, 2020).

Members of Generation Z related to social media recruiting

Members of Gen Z use social media between six and ten hours per day, on average (Menevse, 2019; Kajanová, Sedláček & Soósová, 2017). Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are used most actively, but members of Gen Z have expressed concerns that HR managers might identify their profile on social media (Menevse, 2019; Karácsony & Vasa, 2020). This has even led to students actively changing their social media presence, removing tagged photos, and blocking content so that companies would have a positive impression of them (Menevse, 2019). 73.5% of companies recruit on social media using Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Instagram (Melanthiou, Pavlou & Constantinou, 2015). Referring to Muduli and Trivedi (2020), there is a significant connection between recruitment through social media and different skills both before and after hiring. In particular, credible, relevant and sufficient information is communicated via social media. For social media applications, HR managers should direct their focus on work-relevant information and avoid personal details since social media cannot predict job performance (Zhang et al., 2020). From a technical perspective, mobile recruiting means that the company website works on mobile devices such as smartphones (Strzygowski, 2014). This is of great importance since there is a significant relationship between professionalism of social media usage as well successful job placements (Winnen, Schrader & Tirrel, 2021) while social media profiles are also part of the digital identity of companies (Tirrel & Winnen, 2019).

Gen Z prefers to use search engines for job searches, followed by internet job exchanges (Weitzel et al., 2020a). Analogue media such as print media are becoming increasingly unpopular due to digitization, so that only 3% of members of Gen Z use them (Karácsony et al., 2020). According to Weitzel et al. (2020a), recommendations from acquaintances, social network platforms as well as specific programs for pupils, trainees and students are used for job searches. Gen Z wants to be contacted not only by email, but also by phone or through career networks. An active approach led to every third person becoming aware of an initially unknown company and finally applying there. Referring to Hurrelmann et al. (2019), employer review portals are not yet used by the majority of Gen Z, but websites are considered extremely helpful. Furthermore, 17% of Gen Z have used social media channels such as WhatsApp or Instagram to get information, or to rate companies. For job applications, Gen Z mainly uses company application portals and online career exchanges such as StepStone (Hurrelmann et al., 2019). Gen Z rates the possibility of applying via WhatsApp (19%), XING (18%), Facebook (17%), LinkedIn (14%), Instagram (10%) or Snapchat (4%) as low. Companies primarily use Facebook (30.4%), XING (22.8%), LinkedIn Instagram (16.4%), YouTube (5.5%), Twitter (3.7%) and professional forums (3.6%) to disseminate image advertising, so members of Gen Z already receive advertising via social media (Weitzel et al., 2020b).

About half of Gen Z prefers to be addressed directly by the companies as opposed to a traditional application, so that one third of the candidates would be willing to pay for better visibility, therefore the channel chosen for this approach is of direct importance (Weitzel et al., 2020b). However, there is rarely a consensus among candidates on the choice of channel and 50 % of candidates would like to be contacted via their private email account, which, in turn, is rejected by every fifth candidate (Weitzel et al., 2020b). When addressing potential candidates, it is important to get in touch individually and to tailor the approach to the profile by presenting a reason as well as obvious interest and contact details (Ullah & Witt, 2018).

Furthermore, an appealing subject and a short description of the job offer are important (Dannhäuser & Chikato, 2017). Likewise, HR managers should be aware that they are not focusing on one channel, but that various channels contribute to success and that for example by creating so-called candidate personas, they can better empathize with the target group being sought by analyzing the interests and locations of that group (Dannhäuser & Braehmer, 2017). In addition, active sourcing can also entail risks. For example, some candidates feel annoyed because too many inquiries are uninteresting and do not match their own skills or the contact inquiries only contain standardized texts and do not match their own profile (Weitzel et al., 2020b). As a consequence, candidates do not apply to the company and communicate negatively about it (Weitzel et al., 2020b). Nevertheless, some candidates respond to annoyed approaches in order to maintain contact with the companies (Weitzel et al., 2020b).

Further development is then aimed at apps that for instance represent an applicant management system (Dannhäuser, 2017). When designing the mobile application process the job advertisement must be optimized so that potential candidates always have a positive experience with the company (Böhm & Jäger, 2016; Ullah & Witt, 2018). Sending an application via a mobile device is becoming increasingly important for Gen Z (Weitzel et al., 2020a). The main reasons for this are the changed media usage of Gen Z and the technological progress of mobile devices (Böhm & Jäger, 2016). Currently, half of Gen Z still uses a device with a keyboard, but significantly less than Gen Y, so Gen Z is also increasingly relying on mobile devices for job searches (Weitzel et al., 2020a), underlying the relevance of having a website responsive in its design, i.e. website works on mobile devices (Strzygowski, 2014). One part of Gen Z even prefers to apply for a job via an app, while the other part refrains from doing so (Weitzel et al., 2020a).

Candidate experience within the candidate journey

Within a company, the candidate experience is important for reducing application dropouts, improving reputation, increasing the credibility of the employer brand and improving recruiting (Athanas & Wald, 2014). In order for a company to always take the right steps in recruiting, it is essential to deal with the candidate journey and the resulting candidate experience (Rütten, 2020). The candidate journey is initially the sum of all direct and indirect touchpoints (Verhoeven, 2020). The candidate experience refers to the overall impression that the potential candidate receives from the employer during the recruitment process (Verhoeven, 2016a). For a positive candidate experience, employers must act clearly and authoritatively in their candidate communication, be results-oriented, always treat potential candidates as equals, and show appreciation because if one of these three components is neglected, the experience suffers (Dannhäuser, 2017).

The candidate journey can also be optimized through target group-specific search engine optimization analyses, so that potential candidates receive the right information at the right time within their journey in order to have a positive experience (Ullah & Witt, 2018). Referring to Athanas and Wald (2017). In addition, a quarter of new entrants are disappointed by their new employer because the onboarding phase is poorly organized. Furthermore, for a positive candidate experience, the application process must take a maximum of six weeks (speed as a positive impact on the candidate experience, as candidates do not have to wait long for a decision (Athanas & Wald, 2014; Ryan, Ali, Hauer & Jillyan, 2017), job titles must be

formulated in an understandable way, and more than half of all applicants expect companies to have a confident online presence (Athanas & Wald, 2017). Information about potential employers becomes increasingly important the further the candidate progresses in the candidate journey (Ryan et al., 2017). If the company succeeds in this, there is a positive correlation between the candidate experience and employer branding, so that employer attractiveness increases with a more extensive use of social media channels and a talent pipeline (Allden & Harris, 2013). Likewise, a positive candidate experience cushions an applicant's disappointment at a rejection (Athanas & Wald, 2014). Verhoeven's (2016b) 6-phase model describes an ideal-typical candidate journey process.

METHODS

The methodology is a cross-sectional case study (Saunders et al., 2016). In order to be able to describe a phenomenon, which could not be grasped theoretically up to now, the case study serves as a research method to gain knowledge (Mayring, 2002; Yin, 1993). We conducted nine semi-structured interviews with members of Gen Z as well as a focus group discussion with six HR managers in November 2020 in Germany. Moreover, we conducted a focus group discussion in October 2020, again in Germany. Based on an interview guide which was prepared and pre-tested in advance, the experts were asked questions in a specific order related to the research question (Diekmann, 2005; Döring & Bortz 2016; Hussy, Schreier & Echterhoff, 2013). The empirical basis is therefore Yin's (1993) case study. In doing so, we created an interview guide with its empirical basis (cf. appendices 1 and 2). One exemplary interview question for the interviews is: "Which social media do you prefer for your job search?" and one exemplary focus group discussion question is: "How successful are you in using social media as a sourcing tool and actively targeting members of Gen Z ?" Accordingly, who is drawn into the category of expert depends on his or her special knowledge of the subject matter targeted in the question (Hitzler, 1994). To implement the two techniques presented, between-method triangulation according to Denzin's (1970) triangulation concept was used in order to be able to compare different points of view.

Within qualitative research, in contrast to quantitative research, a small sample the "conscious or purposeful selection of cases with a lot of information has developed" (purposive/ purposeful sampling) (Patton, 2002). Accordingly, the sample is purposively selected based on both theoretical and prior empirical knowledge (Döring & Bortz, 2016), cf. appendices 3 and 4 for an overview of our purposeful sample. Since our sample is not intended to represent the population of the generation, no sample error is expected. In this study, only members of Gen Z were selected as interviewees since these are members of the generation of interest (Klaffke, 2014; Oertel, 2014), again cf. appendices 3 and 4. The requirement for the focus group discussion is that participants must work in human resources departments in Germany and must already have experience in social media recruiting. According to Graefe (2020), there were approximately 238,400 people employed in the field of human resources in Germany. The participants for the interviews can be narrowed down more, as they initially belong to the Generation Z and due to research ethics, only adult interviewees were selected. Thus, the cohort contains individual born between 1996 and 2002. Based on the research question and aim of this study, it was important to us that the participants had recently been

looking for a job or training, so we interviewed the newly started trainees for this purpose. According to the German Federal Statistical Office, around 465,200 people signed a new training contract in Germany in 2020 (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2021). The interviews ended when theoretical saturation was achieved (Charmaz, 2006). All interviewees have started their apprenticeship on August 01, 2020, so that every interview partner (IP) remembered the application process well. The HR managers were also selected purposefully and recruited either via professional contacts through a proactive recruiting process using the social network XING. Two group interviewees (GI) in the focus group discussion belong to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and the other four interviewees work within a large company, according to the definition of the European Commission (2015), cf. appendix 4.

In the present study, every interview was audio-recorded, transcribed and the data was analyzed by applying the qualitative content analysis, which represents a systematic procedure (Mayring, 2015). This is reflected in the fact that the content analysis proceeds theory-guided and deductive while the steps of the analysis are derived from the theoretical considerations (Mayring, 2015). Explicit rules make it possible to follow and check the qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2015). Within the study, the following three aggregate categories were identified: Importance of social media, use of social media, candidate experience. Figure 1 visualizes the data structure, since Corley and Gioia (2004, p. 184) state “no data structure, know nothing”.

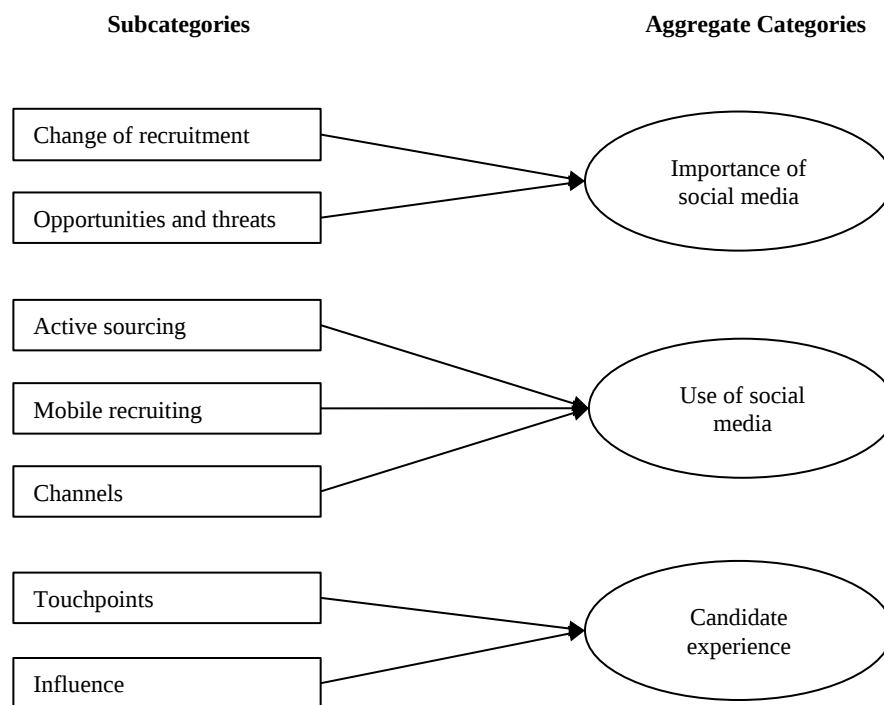


Figure 1. Data structure
[Source: Own depiction]

The data structure represents the core and the central instrument of the content analysis, which is divided into subcategories and aggregate categories, since Mayring requires a category

system (Hussy et al., 2013; Mayring, 2015). In order to be transparent an anchor example with representative data from the interviews is presented in table 1.

Table 1. Anchor examples for coding categories

1 Importance of Social Media		
A Change of recruitment	of	A1 "Social media has gained a lot of importance in recent years and has also shown a lot of influence on society." (IP 6)
B Opportunities and threats		B1 "One opportunity is definitely that you are only globally networked and can communicate with people from all over the world. I would say that the risks are that a reality is portrayed that does not correspond to the actual reality and deviates from it. Many people place themselves higher than they are or spread ideals that don't correspond to reality at all." (IP 1)
2 Use of Social Media		
C Sourcing	Active	C1 "So I'll put it this way, if you're looking for a job and you really make the effort and register everywhere, then I'd be happy if someone got in touch. I'm actually quite flexible and open about that." (IP 5)
[...]		
<i>Full table can be obtained upon request.</i>		
[Source: Own table]		

Repeated review of the material ensured intracoder reliability. In addition, communicative validation strategies such as member checking were used (Flick, 2019). The quality criteria of Lincoln and Guba (1985), e.g., credibility and transferability as well as Mayring (2002), e.g., argumentative interpretive support and triangulation, were ensured and complied with. Now the results of the analysis are presented, following the logic of the data structure. First, the results of the interviews with members of Gen Z will be presented and second, the results will be compared with the results of the focus group discussion.

RESULTS

Importance of social media

Change of recruitment

The interviewees attach a high and constant importance to social media recruiting. Furthermore, the importance will continue to increase and rise as both younger and older people engage with social media. The reason for this high significance lies primarily in the widespread acceptance of social media within society and is associated with a right to exist. "I think it's increasing more and more, so when I see that ten-year-olds are on Instagram, the importance of social media is currently huge. We are simply growing up with it. [...] So, what new functions are added, especially for companies. There are more features and I think that's why the importance will also grow more and more" (IP 2). It is already evident that the private use of social media is much higher than its use for job searches. This result on our research is due to the lack of awareness of social media recruiting, as members of Gen Z are aware that it is possible to conduct a company search via social media. In contrast, the ever-growing presence

of companies on social media is recognised by some of the members of Gen Z. Within the focus group discussion, all interviewees agree that the importance of social media increases in recruitment.

Opportunities and threats

The next subcategory shows global networking, accessibility of different generations, high awareness and versatile communication as examples of the opportunities offered. In addition, social media creates a network. Interviewee 6 even draws a comparison with analog media: "I definitely see great opportunities, because it's easier to reach people and not so complicated. In the past, people only advertised jobs in the newspaper, and at the moment that only happens every now and then I think." In addition to the opportunities mentioned by members of Gen Z, they also point out risks. First of all, time wasting is a risk, since a lot of time is spent in social media and members of Gen Z are already making a reminder to put the cell phone aside. The use of social media represents a high potential for addiction and is often characterised by fake accounts to prevent bullying, representing another risk. Due to the private use of social media, people are more often confronted with advertising from companies or products in their free time, which also represents a risk for members of Gen Z. Unless one responds to active approaches, companies often come across as intrusive.

There is also agreement on the opportunities and risks. The greatest opportunities include increased visibility, increased awareness, greater tangibility and proximity. The use of social media leads to a reduction of distance with the applicant and the company becomes globally networked: "It's about sharing your thoughts, networking with each other. Social media has become big because of its personal character. It's about networking with friends and networking across national borders. After that, companies first became aware that it can also be good for companies to private individuals. That's why something like Instagram works particularly well, because you always have the aspect of approachability and a very natural form of communication, which kind of builds bridges and breaks down walls, so that you create a closeness between companies and private individuals" (GI 4). Furthermore, companies already achieve increased added value with the free use of the platforms. However, without an additional budget, visibility turns out to be low, which is a risk of social media recruiting from the HR managers' point of view. Due to the fast response time expected by candidates, companies need to implement quick response processes. In the future, it should be noted that the popularity of the channels is always changing and the fast pace must be taken into account when selecting channels.

Use of social media

Active sourcing

The topic of active sourcing creates new prospects for members of Gen Z as they become aware of a possibly unknown company. "Especially with companies that you don't necessarily have on your radar, you then know that they actually [...] have areas that you would like to get into. I can understand that it can be very annoying when certain companies don't understand that

you say no and don't show interest, but they keep trying" (IP 1). Members of Gen Z view this potential pushiness of companies as a disadvantage. This is especially true if the companies always confront the young people with messages, even though they have communicated a lack of interest. During the active job search, however, this approach is seen as particularly attractive. Members of Gen Z are open to active sourcing and are positive about being approached via Facebook, Instagram (except from WhatsApp) and business channels.

Active sourcing is not used by HR managers when recruiting members of Gen Z. If it is used for other target groups, a combination of predefined text modules with two or three variables that fit the candidate individually is used: "No copy and paste, just change the name, but really respond to the candidate profile as well as possible so that the candidate notices that you have dealt with the profile. I believe that the more individualized the approach, the better the response rate" (GI 5). Active sourcing is mainly used for hard-to-fill positions. The search is carried out by applying Boolean search operators or a target company list with corresponding cover story.

Mobile recruiting

In addition to the use of applicant management systems, an application is typically submitted via laptop. Although user-friendliness of the websites stand out as practical and important, this is not the most relevant aspect and the resulting lack of digitization does not achieve any deterrence among members of Gen Z. "I don't think it would be a deal breaker, because I can't call an entire company into question based on the website. If I can't find out any information at all about the company on the website via mobile, then maybe" (IP 3). However, an deal breaker at this point is a career site that is difficult to find and the absence of contact persons. Mobile devices such as smartphones are used by members of Gen Z to search for information and find out about possible vacancies and potential employers at any time during the application process. The HR managers agreed on these aspects during the focus group discussion and came to comparable results.

Channels

Based on our interviews, members of Gen Z primarily use Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube and Snapchat mainly for private purposes while Facebook is seldomly used. In addition, TikTok is shown to be more of an entertainment site which is not very well regarded and is viewed as inappropriate for job searches. Interview 3 states: "TikTok is something for watching funny videos and having fun with in your free time, but not for a serious job search". With regard to the search for a new employer, social media are currently hardly taken into consideration and the application takes place almost exclusively for the via the website. Here, the career site stands out as the first source of information about the companies and is the focus of the application process. "I have used social media rather less in my job search. I mainly went through their website and didn't pay attention to how they represented themselves on social media" (IP 1). This is related to ignorance of vacancies and social media presences since the members of Gen Z are not informed: "I didn't use social media because I didn't know" (IP 8). When social media was used for job searches, members of Gen Z felt that people already knew the colleagues and could gain internal insights from the company in this way: "They also

showed a lot of what the employees did in the company. I have to say that I liked that and I had the feeling that I knew the people much better” (IP 2). Furthermore, the application Snapchat is not used for job searches either, though members of Gen Z would subscribe to a trainee-managed Snapchat account and check the content regularly. With regard to business channels, XING and LinkedIn are not very well known to members of Gen Z, although their features can be helpful: “That sounds really good and I think it would be perfect for me. I will definitely take a closer look at that and can well imagine that I will use it more often” (IP 9).

When using social media channels, HR managers believe it is important that they are well-maintained and authentic. All group interviewees agree that a company must focus on one medium at the beginning of the social media journey in order to be successful and that the distribution of tasks within the team must be clearly structured. For group interviewee 4, daily communication takes place on the channels. Here, the strategy of lead generation is pursued with a target group-specific approach and a job spreader, so that the goal is to attract as many potential candidates as possible from the job market. To effectively create the strategy, the target group definition as well as the employer brand definition per channel, an editorial plan can be used. HR managers use the business networks XING and LinkedIn as well as Facebook, YouTube and Instagram for recruitment. Moreover, Snapchat and TikTok are predominantly used for recruiting members of Gen Z, with the Snapchat account being managed by current trainees. “We want to communicate and present ourselves in such a way that it remains authentic, and that's why it's clearly anchored in our strategy that we also get our employees on board. [...] Every picture or every video includes our employees or our trainees” (GI 4).

Candidate experience

Touchpoints

During the candidate journey, members of Gen Z want to be contacted two to three times a week to build a candidate experience. Every contact with members of Gen Z indicates that the company is interested in the candidate. Interviewee 3 states: “Well, I think that if you are contacted often, it shows that they are interested. It's not supposed to be spam when I get called three times a day, but I think if you get in touch regularly, that already shows interest, so it's good”. Internal events, trade fairs or cooperation between schools and employers are used for direct contacts. Job alerts via email as well as talent pools are relatively unknown to members of Gen Z, although a constant contact is understood as positive. According to members of Gen Z, the contact should be by email. “Actually, only via my email address. I regularly check it, and if I've given my mobile phone number somewhere, it's also fine if they call me” (IP 7).

To ensure a successful candidate experience, all six interviewees in the focus group discussion stated that all phases of the process are important. It is essential that all phases are given the same relevance and are coordinated with each other: “It's like a cycle. If I bring people on board and I don't perform afterwards, they just jump off again. Then you have costs again for the new recruitment and you have to convince new people. I then find the people who dropped out again on Kununu. It's all interdependent, and for me there is no phase that is more or not so important” (GI 3). Measuring the candidate experience is very difficult, but key

performance indicators can be defined and analyzed, e.g. conversion rate, interaction rate, or active applicant count in order to identify good or bad aspects of the candidate experience.

Influence

Although members of Gen Z can be influenced by social media, according to our research, the idea of posting negative comments on it is not common among them as they prefer to resolve their issues directly with the employer. Furthermore, a high level of influence is exerted by family and acquaintances as well as by influencer marketing. The employer rating platform Kununu is not very well known, although members of Gen Z would be influenced by these ratings if they were used: “The apprentices didn’t give much information, of course, but that’s when I looked at it, and because of the bad evaluations, some companies were kicked out. I simply didn’t want to take the risk that they wouldn’t support the apprentices, for example. You are quickly influenced by what you read, and then it doesn’t matter if a fake account wrote it. You also don’t think about the sources and whether it’s really true or not. I do think that’s a certain risk for companies, but it’s difficult to change or prevent anything” (IP 6). Nevertheless, members of Gen Z form its own opinions and this is always most important to them.

According to the group interviewees, members of Gen Z are quicker to post something negative than positive on social media and will abandon the application process due to negative reviews. Members of Gen Z are classified by HR managers as being influenced by social media as well as friends and acquaintances. In addition to employer review portals, influencer marketing also plays a significant role. For this reason, it is important for the HR managers to respond to and refute negative comments: “The good thing is that you can craft the whole thing. [...] I was able to refute every negative assessment later on, and the company, without treating the applicant negatively, came out in a positive light, in my opinion. You get a good balance by writing ‘Yes, I understand that and also that you didn’t like this and that. We see it a little differently’. It’s always the same pattern and you can pick up a lot of things that are subjective” (GI 6).

CONCLUSIONS

Both, the nine interviews and the focus group discussion with six HR Managers, uncovered that the importance of social media recruiting is steadily increasing and that it is no longer possible to recruit without using social media. Some positive and negative effects outlined in the literature were confirmed by the qualitative analysis. For example the constant accessibility and usability represent a great opportunity, whereas the costs and resources represent a risk (Bärmann 2012; Gabriel & Röhrs, 2017). This study highlights that members of Gen Z are largely unaware that social media can be used for job searches, being in contrast with existing literature (cf. Abramova et al., 2022). Consequently, companies need to make their target group aware of social media throughout the candidate journey and raise their awareness, e.g. by being able to provide further internal insights on social media channels during the recruiting process. Therefore, candidates can better identify themselves with companies and their employees.

Due to members of Gen Z’s preference for applying via the company’s career website, it is important to set it up well and in a structured manner. Since the career website serves as the

first source of information, it is also advisable for companies to ensure that it can be found quickly. Research has shown that the career website is the heart of recruiting (Ullah & Witt, 2018). Furthermore, it is significant that the career website is presented in a user-friendly manner on mobile devices, so that it is not a deterrent for members of Gen Z. The results of the qualitative analysis uncover a discrepancy compared to the studies described. These show that members of Gen Z tend to use a mobile device although in the interviews conducted, only interviewee 9 applies via smartphone. At this point, companies should link their social media channels directly to the career website because this study highlights that members of Gen Z are often unaware of them. The social media content should concentrate on internal insights and not just focus on the company's products, as this content does not coincide with the expectations of members of Gen Z.

In terms of the various platforms, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube and, in some cases, Snapchat are used for private purposes, whereas social media are rarely considered for job searches. TikTok is characterized by members of Gen Z more as an entertainment site and they probably do not use this medium for their job search. However, even on private networks, it is possible to reach out to members of Gen Z by posting ads. Furthermore, pages within the platforms specifically geared to members of Gen Z arouse interest and, if the accounts are run by current trainees, this interest intensifies. This result is also evident in research, underlining its importance (Schröter-Unlü, 2017; Ullah & Witt, 2018). The focus group discussion reveals that companies use Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram for recruitment in addition to the business networks XING and LinkedIn. At this point, companies are recommended to focus on the platforms Instagram, Snapchat as well as XING and LinkedIn to address members of Gen Z in a target group-oriented manner. In doing so, it is important that content is tailored to them and authentic, e.g. by letting apprentices share their views on the employer in addition to application tips (Ullah & Witt, 2018). Based on the focus group discussion, it is also possible to recommend that companies include their own employees as ambassadors within the use of social media, thereby ensuring a certain authenticity. In addition, an editorial plan lends itself to effective use and a predefined strategy for social media activities is essential for success (Bärmann, 2012; Ullah and Witt, 2018; Weitzel et al., 2020b).

Furthermore, our research shows that members of Gen Z's use of business channels ensures the openness to active sourcing identified in the interviews. The focus group discussion shows that HR managers are not currently using active sourcing to reach the members of Gen Z. In addition to the business channels, companies may also actively approach members of Gen Z via Facebook and Instagram, although they should not act in an intrusive manner. It is important that companies write to potential candidates individually and under consideration of their profile. In addition to internal events, trade fairs and cooperation between schools and employers also attract a lot of attention with the initially unknown possibilities of a talent pool and job alerts, as potential contact points during the candidate journey. Therefore, companies should establish a talent pool and have a job alert set up. In addition, companies should draw attention to these opportunities within social media and HR managers should also communicate these tools to the applicants at all stages along the candidate journey. To build a positive candidate experience, companies need to contact members of Gen Z two to three times a week. In addition, despite their own opinions always being the most important, the influence of family and acquaintances as well as social media plays an essential role in the candidate experience. At this point, it is advisable for companies to engage with the employer review platform

Kununu, as members of Gen Z referred to its influence in the interviews despite their tendency not to use it at present. Influencing families and acquaintances can be ensured, for example, through a positive employer brand, active employee referral marketing, and participation in trade fairs and cooperation with schools. The six HR Managers of the focus group discussion revealed that measuring the candidate experience involves a great deal of difficulty. However, HR managers use previously created indicators for measuring the success. This result is also reflected in research (Brickwedde, 2017; Gabriel & Röhrs, 2017; Ullah & Witt, 2018). In addition, it is advisable to respond to negative reviews within the Kununu platform in order to invalidate them and put the company back in a positive light. In practice, the candidate experience is also a cycle in which all phases must be coordinated with each other and one phase actively influences the other phase. For this reason, companies must actively take into account the six phases according to Verhoeven (2016b) shown within the theoretical principles when recruiting members of Gen Z. This can be implemented within the recruitment process, especially in the attraction as well as the information phase through social media, where potential candidates become aware of the company. With regard to the use of social media, the results are partly complementary and partly contradictory. On the one hand, this is due to the fact that the companies use YouTube, Instagram and to some extent Snapchat and TikTok for recruiting members of Gen Z, which reflects the generation's preferences. However, there is a discrepancy in the use of TikTok, because members of Gen Z use this medium exclusively privately and cannot imagine using it in their job search. Furthermore, Gen Z would like to be actively approached, whereas HR managers do not engage in active sourcing with them.

Summing this up, our study uncovered that members of Gen Z use social media mainly for private purposes and are rarely aware of its opportunities in seeking jobs or informing themselves about potential employers. Moreover, members of Gen Z do not use social media and technology in general to their full potential (do not prefer applying by using mobile devices). The HR managers did not expect members of Gen Z to be so uninformed about these possibilities, as members of Gen Z seem to have high affinity towards technology.

Therefore, there is a discrepancy about what members of Gen Z really know about social media recruiting as well as what they make use of and what the HR managers expect them to know/use. As a consequence, both have to gain more knowledge about what is really happening and what is desired. Therefore, HR managers should focus on informing members of Gen Z about the possibilities of social media recruiting instead of expecting them to mainly apply from a mobile device by using social media accounts. This study shines light on both perspectives and clarifies the expectations of both parties.

The diverse results of the study would have achieved a higher comparability among themselves if the sample had been homogeneously selected. Despite the evaluation by qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (2015, 2002) and the adherence to quality criteria, a certain degree of subjectivity is present. In addition, this qualitative study was conducted under the research philosophy of interpretivism. This implies that the focus is on interpreting the results obtained and gaining a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study within this sample, rather than striving for representative results for the entire generation.

Furthermore, the study was solely conducted in Germany and does not allow any conclusions to be drawn for other countries or cultures. The topic of social media recruiting and the law also was not discussed, although the legal framework for the search for qualified employees via social media should not be disregarded (cf. Ulbricht, 2017). In addition, the

issue of data protection with the General Data Protection Regulation has also not been taken into account, whereby this is important for the selection of channels (cf. Walzer et al., 2019). For further research, it is therefore essential to include both, legal framework conditions and compliance with data protection, in the context of social media recruiting.

For further research, it is essential to consider the expectations of members of Gen Z as well as the candidate experience created within the candidate journey. Due to the constantly advancing digitalization, it can be assumed that the user behavior of members of Gen Z (and the subsequent Gen Alpha) will also continuously develop with regard to social media. Future HR research should analyze how social media recruiting and the candidate experience develop over time (e.g. after implementation of the aforementioned recommendations) and research again how both, members of Gen Z as well as HR managers, opinions develop. Moreover, a quantitative study could be conducted in order to fully understand which social media are used (or expected to be used) to derive representative knowledge gaps of members of Gen Z and HR managers, as initially presented in this study.

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Authors' Note

All correspondence should be addressed to
Henning Tirrel
FOM University of Applied Sciences
Münster, Germany
henning.tirrel2@fom-net.de

APPENDIX

Appendix 1. Assignment of the interview questions with the empirical basis – interviews

Interview questions	Empirical basis
How do you think about the current importance of social media in recruiting?	cf. Hurrelmann et al., 2019; Klaffke, 2014
How do you currently perceive social media recruiting?	cf. Hurrelmann et al., 2019; Menevse, 2019; Weitzel et al., 2020a
What opportunities and risks do you experience in social media recruiting?	cf. Bärman, 2012; Gabriel and Röhrs, 2017; Krämer et al., 2014
Which social media networks do you prefer for your job search?	cf. Hurrelmann et al., 2019; Kajanová et al., 2017
How often do you apply via mobile devices?	cf. Weitzel et al., 2020a
How important is the user-friendliness of the career sites and social media networks when you open them on your smartphone?	cf. Weitzel et al., 2020a
How do you think about being actively contacted by recruiters via social media networks and which channels do you prefer here?	cf. Weitzel et al., 2020b
What expectations do you have during the application process?	cf. Hurrelmann et al., 2019
How often and where (in online social media) may a potential employer contact you?	cf. Ullah and Witt, 2018
What leads you to post a negative review about a company on social media?	cf. Athanas and Wald, 2014; Ryan et al., 2017
To what extent do personal positive or negative experiences with the company have an impact on your perception?	cf. Allden and Harris, 2013; Athanas and Wald, 2014; Hurrelmann et al., 2019

Appendix 2. Assignment of the interview questions with the empirical basis – Focus group discussion

Interview questions	Empirical basis
How do you think about the current importance of social media in recruiting?	cf. Hurrelmann et al., 2019; Klaffke, 2014
If possible, reconsider a time without social media. What sourcing tools did you use? How effective were they?	cf. Koch, Gerber and de Klerk, 2018
What opportunities and risks do you experience in(not) using social media?	cf. Bärmann, 2012; Gabriel and Röhrs, 2017; Stock-Homburg/ Groß, 2019
(How) Has your recruiting improved after implementing social media?	cf. Bärmann, 2012; Gabriel and Röhrs, 2017; Stock-Homburg/ Groß, 2019
For which purposes do you use social media?	cf. Koch et al., 2018
What does your HR marketing mix look like in terms of social media?	cf. Weitzel et al., 2020b
How often and why do you use the different social media channels?	cf. Koch et al., 2018
How successful are you in using social media as a sourcing tool by focusing on the Generation Z?	cf. Koch et al., 2018
When you actively source potential candidates, what do you look for in profiles?	cf. Dannhäuser and Braehmer, 2017; Ullah and Witt, 2018
How can companies use standardized tools efficiently and still achieve a high degree of individualization in the form of a perceived personal and appreciative approach to candidates?	cf. Dannhäuser, 2017
How do you structure your social media activities?	cf. Bärmann, 2012; Ullah and Wittm 2018; Weitzel et al., 2020b
Which aspects are important to Generation Z during the application process and at work?	cf. Hurrelmann et al., 2019; Weitzel et al., 2020a
Which channels does Generation Z use and prefer to apply for a job from your point of view?	cf. Hurrelmann et al., 2019; Kajanová et al., 2017
How do you realize a positive candidate experience? What do your success factors look like?	cf. Dannhäuser, 2016c; Ullah and Witt, 201; Verhoeven 2016d
How influenced is Generation Z by positive or negative experiences from family and friends in the application process?	cf. Allden and Harris, 2013; Athanas and Wald, 2014; Hurrelmann et al. 2019

Appendix 3. Sample – interviews

Interview partner (IP)	Year of birth	Work experience	Current education
1	2001	Voluntary internships	Industrial clerk
2	2002	Part-time jobs	Industrial clerk
3	2001	Voluntary internships	Industrial clerk
4	2001	Student internships	Industrial clerk
5	2002	Training as a warehouse logistics specialist	Machinist
6	2001	Part-time jobs, student internships	Industrial clerk
7	2001	Voluntary internships	Electronics technician for industrial engineering
8	1997	Apprenticeship as electrician, work and travel, voluntary work experiences	Educator
9	2002	Student internships	Carpenter

Appendix 4. Sample overview – focus group discussion

Group participant	Industry	Current professional activity
1	Mechanical engineering	Twenty years as a training coordinator, vocational educator and purchaser in a medium-sized company
2	Automotive Industry	HR manager in recruiting in a large company
3	Public administration	HR consultant and member companies in a large company
4	Public administration	HR marketing manager with focus on social media within trainee recruitment in a large company
5	Service / Banking, finance, insurance	Recruiting manager in a medium-sized company
6	Logistics	Social media expert for recruiting in a large company