Employer Branding on TikTok –

A qualitative study on Attracting Generation Z in the Job Market

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Abstract

Background: In today's competitive job market, it is vital to have a powerful employer branding strategy to recruit and retain talented individuals. In order to effectively connect with Generation Z, who predominantly utilize TikTok on a daily basis, businesses must leverage this platform to enhance their company visibility.

Aim: The aim of the study is to determine the factors that have a favorable or negative impact on individuals' views of employer-branded content and how it can potentially influence their intentions to apply for a job. This will provide actionable insights for companies to refine their content strategies in alignment with the preferences of their target audience.

Method: Two guided focus groups comprising a total of 16 Generation Z participants were conducted. Participants were exposed to a selection of employer branded TikTok content and engaged in discussions exploring their perceptions, preferences, and the content's impact on their view of the employers.

Results: The results indicate that Generation Z generally has a positive perception of employer-branded content on TikTok, with a particular appreciation for authenticity and gaining insights into the company culture. Content shared by employees tends to resonate more than content shared by official company accounts. While TikTok content can influence attractiveness as an employer, its impact varies based on personal interests and familiarity with the company.

Conclusion: This study provides insights into how Generation Z perceives employer-branded content on TikTok, emphasizing authenticity and engagement as critical factors. Companies are encouraged to adopt a dual content strategy, utilizing both polished corporate content and authentic behind-the-scenes narratives to appeal effectively to passive viewers and active job seekers.

Keywords: Generation Z, TikTok, Employer branding, Employer branding strategies

Inhaltsverzeichnis

1. Introduction

"Turning top employees into brand ambassadors who will raise awareness for the company through social media and content generation will attract top talent to open positions, and convey employee satisfaction and a positive work culture."

– John Feldmann, Official Member Forbes HR Council

The term "war for talent" describes the competition that exists in today's professional world for attracting and keeping talented workers, which is essential to the expansion and success of a business (Beechler & Woodward, 2009). Large corporations encounter a specific difficulty in the rivalry for young talent. They are frequently seen as influential, traditional organizations that appear distant (Marshall, 2016), which hampers their appeal to Generation Z candidates (Halová & Müller, 2023). Due to Generation Zs significant presence in the workforce, it is imperative for organizations to appeal to them. Estimates suggest they already comprise around 20-28% of employees and are projected to become the largest demographic by 2026 (Ratnasari et al., 2023; Nguyen, 2023; Ganguli & Padhy, 2023).

Generation Z's digital fluency and demand for authenticity set them apart from previous generations, shaping their expectations in both personal and professional environments. Being the first digital generation, they possess a high level of proficiency in digital practices and devote a significant portion of their time to the online world (Halová & Müller, 2023). Thereby, they distinguish themselves from previous generations by growing up in an environment saturated with abundant information, making them adept at detecting spuriousness or insincerity (Vardhan et al., 2022). Consequently, values such as authenticity, diversity, and sustainability hold significant importance in both personal and work life (Gkogkos, 2021). Hence, this generation also seeks evidence of inclusive work environments and authentic

interactions, while being more resistant to conventional advertisements like staged employee presentations or formal corporate statements on websites (Amanda Slavin, 2015).

In today's competitive job market, presenting a company adeptly is important for attracting talent, with employer branding evolving to enhance internal and external perceptions. The concept of employer branding was initially developed in 1990 with the goal of creating a story that presents a company as an exemplary workplace, both internally and externally, to recruit and retain talent (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Tanwar & Prasad, 2016). Several studies have shown a clear and positive link between a strong employer brand and the likelihood of people wanting to work for a specific company (Chhabra & Sharma, 2014; Kissel & Büttgen, 2015; Rani et al., 2022). However, the external view of this image is primarily shaped by the employees' perception and distribution, rather than the company's self-declared identity. Consequently, it has become relevant to provide employees with platforms to express the company's beliefs and workplace culture, to foster a favorable brand reputation externally (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

In order to establish a compelling and trustworthy employer brand that effectively appeals to Generation Z, it is becoming increasingly important for organizations to use appropriate social platforms. Multiple studies have analyzed the benefits of employer branding on social media, emphasizing its significance as a medium for companies to interact with their desired audience and portray themselves as potential employers (Halová & Müller, 2023; Dannhäuser, 2020 Yoganathan et al., 2021; Salam et al., 2024). Moreover, research showed that prospective employees are increasingly drawn to companies that offer comprehensive information about themselves through social media platforms (Kissel & Büttgen, 2015, Bizzi, 2018), and the company's social media presence highly predicts their likelihood of applying for the job (Rani et al., 2022). As a reaction, organizations are progressively using strategic methods like corporate influencer programs and employer branding campaigns on social media, utilizing the

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influence of genuine individuals to endorse their workplace and allure top talent (Janssen & Rudeloff, 2024; Ellen et al., 2006).

Among the networks on which organizations can connect with Generation Z, the social media platform TikTok has become increasingly relevant for engaging with this generation. As one of their primary choices for everyday use (Goldman, 2024), TikTok's popularity makes it outstand as a channel for companies aiming to connect authentically with this demographic (Rezek, 2019; Bara & Magano, 2021; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2021). Unlike other popular platforms, such as Instagram or Snapchat, where users have greater control over the content they consume, TikTok's "For You" page algorithm recommends various content based on user preferences and activities (Su et al., 2021). This enhances the probability for organizations to organically engage with Generation Z users unfamiliar with them, hence expanding their target audience (Wahid et al., 2022). Additionally, TikTok's sharing mechanisms can further increase visibility among Generation Z by the increased potential for videos to go viral, a phenomenon where content quickly and widely attracts attention through shares and views (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). Furthermore, research indicates that TikTok thrives by showcasing authentic and less professional content, aligning with Generation Z's core values (Chu et al., 2022) and enabling companies to create appealing content without high production costs (Biswas & Suar, 2014).

Despite TikTok's potential and the established concept of employer branding, leveraging TikTok as a platform for employer branding strategies represents a recent approach with limited empirical research. A most recent study by Steinbacher (2022) revealed Generation Z's favorable attitude towards employer branding on TikTok, with interest in authentic behind-the-scenes content, but highlighted reservations about its effectiveness in recruitment strategies. Other existing research on employer branding focuses mainly on linkedin, Facebook, and Instagram, emphasizing practices like authenticity and engaging visuals (Madia, 2011; Kissel & Büttgen, 2015). Since limited research has been conducted on Generation Z's perceptions

regarding companies' content on TikTok, a tailored approach that considers the platform's unique features and user preferences is necessary.

This study intends to explore Generation Z's perceptions of employer-branded content on TikTok, focusing on individuals actively searching for employment in the past 12 months. Specifically, the research will employ guided focus groups presenting a selection of high-performing content examples to Generation Z participants. The objective is to identify the factors that positively and negatively shape their perceptions of employer-branded content and its potential influence on their job application intentions. By uncovering these factors, the study aims to provide actionable insights for companies to refine their content strategies in alignment with the preferences of their target audience. Therefore, this thesis aims to answer the following research question:

RQ1: *How is employer-branded content on TikTok perceived by Generation Z actively seeking employment?*

Additionally, these sub questions are relevant for identifying the elements that resonate with Generation Z, as well as those that may detract from their perception of an employer and exploring the extent to which TikTok content can influence their desire to work for a company:

RQ2: *What content-related factors contribute to Generation Z's positive and negative perceptions of employer-branded content on TikTok?*

RQ3: *How does employer-branded content on TikTok influence Generation Z's view of a company's attractiveness as a potential employer?*

In the following chapter, the key characteristics of Generation Z, the social media platform TikTok will be discussed, along with employer branding. Furthermore, the method is explained in more detail, and the precise steps are illustrated. Afterward, the findings of the focus group are presented and discussed. Lastly, a conclusion and limitations are given.

2. Theoretical Framework

Prior to doing research on employer branding strategies for TikTok among Generation Z, it is essential to establish fundamental definitions of key concepts: Generation Z and the social media platform TikTok, and employer branding. By ensuring a comprehensive grasp of the context, the theory serves as a foundation for comparison by offering a shared vocabulary and conceptual structure.

2.1 Generation Z

Generation Z's growing presence in the workforce brings unique expectations and values that distinguish them from previous generations. According to Ratnasari et al. (2023), researchers have approximated that Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012, makes up around 20-28% of the workforce, and this percentage is expected to increase. The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused notable changes in overall work values, especially among Generation Z. These changes highlight the importance of priorities such as remote work, flexibility, and workplace diversity (Amanda Slavin, 2015). Generation Z exhibits unique attributes in the professional setting, such as a stronger embrace of diversity and a dependence on technology (Pichler et al., 2021). These individuals are distinguished by their purpose-driven and socially conscious behavior. Multiple studies indicate that the younger generation is inclined towards tackling challenges, desiring to cause innovation, and favoring to work independently (Djafarova & Foots, 2022; Singh, 2014). However, Singh (2014) highlights the consistent worries surrounding corporate contexts. Other studies point out that Generation Z is concerned about corporate practices related to sustainability, diversity, and the creation of a safe and supportive work environment (Narayanan, 2022; O'Laughlin, 2008). In addition, Generation Z's upbringing in a culture of safety, marked by overprotective parenting, has hindered their ability to develop essential life skills and become autonomous, making it more difficult to navigate workplace challenges (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). Hence, members of

Generation Z are more prone to experiencing social concerns and difficulties with communication (Tankovic et al., 2022; Gil & Sanagustín-Fons, 2019; Arfé et al., 2016). For example, many Generation Z individuals need more support in social skills like handling calls and writing emails, as they are more accustomed to communicating via text, emoji, and video. Consequently, they expect organizations to provide internal growth opportunities and professional guidance to ease their transition into the workforce (Schroth, 2019).

While Generation Z individuals often have a deficiency in traditional social skills, they excel at navigating the online world compared to previous generations. Growing up in a technologically enhanced digital environment has made them adept with technology and the popular social media platforms as Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest, and youtube (Halová & Müller, 2023). These platforms provide them with a vast amount of information, but also expose them to a significant amount of false or misleading information (Pichler et al., 2021b). As a result, they have developed greater abilities in detecting falsehoods or insincerity (Vardhan et al., 2022). In the virtual realm, where content can be manipulated and spread using tools as facetune, AI, and deep fakes, the principles of authenticity, diversity, and sustainability hold great importance for Generation Z (Gkogkos, 2021).

In summary, Generation Z is distinguished by their adept use of social media, heightened sensitivity to authenticity and sustainability, as well as a preference for flexibility, and diversity in the workplace, which may be attributed to their upbringing in a digital environment. Understanding Generation Z's values, including their emphasis on authenticity, and technological fluency, provides a foundational framework for examining the motivations behind their perceptions and preferences in the workplace. These insights help identify the elements that need to be reflected in companies' efforts to attract the generation, aligning with their unique professional and social expectations.

2.2 Social Media

Social media comprises internet-based platforms that facilitate the creation, exchange, and feedback of user-generated content, marked by its collaborative and always-connected nature. It encompasses tools and platforms for communication, as well as virtual communities where information and ideas can be shared (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Zeng et al., 2010; mcfarland & Ployhart, 2015). Social media has distinct characteristics when compared to traditional media. An important contrast lies in its collaborative aspect, as highlighted by Perloff (2014). Moreover, social media sites, such as youtube, Instagram, and TikTok, provide a virtual environment that enables users to receive feedback in the form of likes and comments from friends, strangers, and companies on the content they share (Butkowski et al., 2019). These platforms are characterized by their continuous connectivity, as they can be accessed on any mobile device at any time of day (Perloff, 2014). Moreover, social media has revolutionized the way information is distributed and consumed. The social networks facilitate multi-directional communication, unlike traditional media which is typically one-directional (mcfarland & Ployhart, 2015).

The engaging nature of social media fosters community and identity formation, while offering organizations opportunities for active user interaction and brand loyalty cultivation. Its level of engagement promotes feelings of community and inclusion, as users establish connections, relationships, and shared experiences (Lee & Hsieh, 2021; Park & Kim, 2014). Furthermore, social media platforms provide users with the opportunity to express themselves and develop their identities by carefully selecting and sharing content (Boyd, 2014). Multiple studies have demonstrated that organizations can utilize social listening and participation to actively interact with consumers, cultivate brand loyalty, and obtain crucial consumer data (Tuten & Solomon, 2017; Park & Kim, 2014).

In conclusion, social media facilitates collaborative content creation and feedback, contrasting traditional media with their interactive, multi-directional communication. They

foster community engagement and provide organizations with avenues for active consumer interaction and brand loyalty cultivation and information dissemination.

2.2.1 TikTok

TikTok has emerged as a leading social media platform, particularly popular among younger individuals, due to its unique content and user engagement features. It is a popular platform with a large user base, primarily consisting of younger individuals, and continues to experience strong growth. After its introduction in 2016, the application quickly became well-known as a favored site for lipsyncing and dancing (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). Multiple researchers leverage the uses and gratification theory to elucidate the success of the platform. According to Scherr and Wang (2021) TikTok usage is motivated by four specific gratifications. Socially rewarding self-presentation, trendiness, escapist addiction, and novelty (Bossen & Kottasz, 2020b). In contemporary times, individuals can distribute various types of content, including short videos and pictures, which are widely acknowledged for their simplicity and authenticity (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022).

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) provides a useful framework for understanding why TikTok resonates more with Generation Z and is particularly effective for reaching them, compared to other generations. The TAM, as proposed by Davis (1989), suggests that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use significantly influence users' acceptance of technology. Previous studies (Zhao & Wang, 2020; Xiao et al., 2019) have applied the TAM to online behavior, indicating that the acceptance of an advertising platform shapes consumer behavior. Research indicates that for Generation Z, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) operates differently than for previous generations (Dadvari & Do, 2019). Due to their digital nativity and comfort with technology, Generation Z is more inclined to engage with platforms that offer personalized and immediate content. The results showed that if Generation Z consumers perceive TikTok videos as providing useful knowledge (perceived usefulness) and find the app

straightforward to interact with (perceived ease of use), they develop a positive attitude towards using the platform (Al-Khasawneh et al., 2022).

Companies can leverage TikTok's high user engagement and algorithmic advantages to enhance their visibility and brand recognition among Generation Z. An advantage for companies to participate on TikTok is that 25% of users of other social media platforms only use them once after downloading, whereas TikTok revealed a significant statistic in 2019, stating that 90% of their users access the app daily, if not more frequently (Statista, 2019). Additionally, due to the algorithm's architecture, the platform facilitates viral content and enables broader user reach compared to other platforms (Wahid et al., 2022), enhancing a company's visibility and brand recognition among Generation Z, even with minimal initial costs (Wahid et al., 2022). Due to this algorithm, the mere exposure effect (Zajonc,1968) could be particularly powerful on TikTok, which suggests that repeated exposure to an object can positively impact one's attitude towards it. Consequently, employer-branded content on TikTok might continually reach users, thus increasing its chances of positively influencing their perceptions of the company (Montoya et al., 2017).

A synopsis of Social Media's and TikTok's distinctive characteristics, along with the underlying reasons outlined by the Uses and Gratification Theory and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), provides a foundation for comprehending the platform's efficacy in engaging with Generation Z. These findings contribute to the development of employer branding strategies that are executed on the relevant platform that align with the preferences and behaviors of Generation Z, allowing organizations to attract and retain young candidates.

2.3 Employer Branding

Researchers generally concur that employer branding is a human resources strategy that includes both internal and external aspects. Internal employer branding refers to the perception and understanding of the employer's image within the business, as well as how this image is

presented to employees (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). External employer branding refers to the way in which the organization showcases itself to potential employees and how it is seen as an employer by the general public (Martin et al., 2005). Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) define employer branding as the systematic development of a distinct and recognizable employer identity, which serves to differentiate a company from its competitors. According to Edwards (2010), employer branding is the application of marketing ideas, namely branding, to human resources activities that aim to attract and retain both current and potential employees. Furthermore, external employer branding can be perceived as the management of a company's image, as proposed by Hatch and Schultz (1997), highlighting that the basis of employer branding is rooted in the organization's identity. The main goal of this strategy, as Martin (2005) points out, is to draw in qualified individuals and guarantee that both present and potential employees are in agreement with the company's values. In this study, these consolidated concepts are utilized, with a particular focus on the external strategy of employer branding, aiming to attract potential Generation Z employees.

Multiple studies highlight the positive impact of employer branding for companies, especially in the field of human resources for attracting prospective employees. Effective employer branding can result in notable competitive advantages by facilitating the attraction and retention of personnel (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Moreover, various studies have consistently discovered a positive relationship between the reputation of a company and the desire to seek employment with the company (Edwards, 2010; Gatewood et al., 1993). According to Figurska and Matuska (2013), a robust employer brand has the ability to increase the number of job applications, attract skilled individuals, and improve the recruitment process by finding candidates who are well-suited for the company's culture. This enhanced candidate matching occurs as prospective employees are able to gain a clearer comprehension and harmonize their requirements, personalities, and values with the organization's reputation

(Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). This demonstrates that a well-established employer brand improves an organization's capacity to attract and retain suitable individuals.

2.3.1 *Employer Branding on Social Media*

Multiple studies have discovered a positive relationship between company reputation and the utilization of social media for employer branding. Social media enables companies to effectively distribute information to previously hard-to-reach target groups, allowing them to engage with communities that have common interests and shared beliefs (Vernuccio, 2014; Vițelar, 2019). The social networks enhance awareness and enable organizations to visually exhibit their work culture and values, offering glimpses into the workplace and fostering trust (Kissel & Büttgen, 2015; Carpentier et al., 2019). Additionally, it allows brands to communicate their narrative to users (Sivertzen et al., 2013). Companies are able to create an online presence to showcase their brand values, giving potential candidates a clear understanding of the workplace and establishing an appealing image as a desirable place to work (Kissel & Büttgen, 2015; Vernuccio, 2014). In addition, Collins and Stevens (2002) study demonstrates that students had a more positive perception of a business when they had access to comprehensive and easily accessible information through online postings. Furthermore, a study examining public reactions to employee posts on social media has found that favorable employee posts can significantly increase online engagement and generate offline word-of-mouth discussions about a company (Y. Lee et al., 2020). The study conducted by Lee et al. (2020) emphasizes the need of utilizing authentic employee voices through social media to enhance the employer brand.

Nevertheless, there is a potential limitation of employer branding strategies on social media and a need for research on newer platforms. If a company's management of social media is inadequate or unappealing, it could lead to a decrease in interest in the company (Schaarschmidt & Walsh, 2020), which is why several companies are cautious about utilizing social media

(Carpentier et al., 2019). Corporations continue to have difficulties in efficiently posting on social media to attract their desired audience (Carpentier et al., 2019). Hence, researchers emphasize the need for corporate branding strategists to adapt to newer social media platforms to attract a younger audience, such as TikTok (Eberle et al., 2013; Kissel & Büttgen, 2015). However, existing research is lacking in identifying the specific factors that lead to successful implementation of employer branding on specifically newer platforms as TikTok.

Particularly through the lenses of the Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G) and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), this framework lays a foundation for understanding Generation Z's values regarding the workforce and behaviors with social media. Social media, characterized by its interactive and user-generated nature, has revolutionized communication and information dissemination, making it a relevant tool for reaching and engaging Generation Z. The U&G Theory elucidates that Generation Z engages with social media platforms to fulfill specific needs such as entertainment, and information acquisition. Consequently, the role of employer branding on social media is to leverage these platforms to attract and retain young talent, while researchers emphasizing the need to adapt to newer platforms as TikTok to reach a younger audience. Especially TikTok aligns well with Generation Z's values of authenticity and preference for personalized and immediate content. Concurrently, it is anticipated that the utilization of TikTok, emphasizing perceived usefulness and ease of use, in line with the TAM, will foster a positive attitude towards an employer brand among Generation Z. It is expected that interactive and authentic content, such as employees naturally advocating their workplace, will be more effective in creating positive perceptions among Generation Z. Additionally, companies leveraging TikTok to create engaging and relatable content are likely to enhance their employer brand and foster brand loyalty among Generation Z users by providing a sense of community and shared experiences. However, corporations often struggle to utilize social

media effectively for employer branding, while there is a gap in existing research regarding the specific factors that lead to successful employer branding on the newer platform TikTok.

In summary, this framework underscores the relevance of aligning employer branding strategies with the preferences and behaviors of Generation Z and the nature of the platform TikTok. This integrated approach serves as a basis for bridging theoretical insights with practical applications in the study and offering valuable insights on how to optimize employer branding strategies in order to effectively engage and attract this demographic in the workforce.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach to obtain in-depth insights into Generation Z's perception of employer-branded content on TikTok. Qualitative methods are particularly suited for conducting a thorough examination of phenomena, allowing for a deeper understanding of behaviors and attitudes (Morse & Field, 1996). Furthermore, this approach is well-suited for investigating personal experiences, viewpoints, and choices of individuals (Berkwits & Inui, 1998).

The focus group technique was chosen for its ability to elicit self-disclosures, meanings, and emotions that might remain concealed in individual interviews (Freeman, 2006). This method is especially advantageous for this study, as it facilitates the uncovering of genuine insights into Generation Z's values and preferences through a collaborative atmosphere. Focus groups, sometimes referred to as group interviews, generally comprise 3 to 12 individuals who possess similar characteristics and are guided by the researcher. The duration of these sessions typically ranges from one to two hours (Patton, 2002).

The study determined a priori to conduct 2 focus groups with each 8 participants. This was anticipated to be sufficient to reach saturation as literature supports, 80% of all topics could be identified in two to three focus groups with an amount of 8 participants (Guest et al., 2016;

Hennink et al., 2019). In addition, previous research has also recommended including six to eight participants per focus group to provide a chance for everyone to share insights, as well as diversity of perceptions (Krueger & Casey, 2014). To gain in-depth insights into participants' perceptions, the focus lied on meticulous preparation and the use of materials such as video examples, ensuring a comprehensive and lengthy discussion process. This use of multimedia aids with visual reinforcement has been proven to effectively enhance participant knowledge, further enriching the data collected in research (Kraft et al., 2016). Additionally, this approach aligns with recommendations for achieving depth in qualitative research, which highlights the importance of recruiting informed participants and utilizing structured yet flexible discussion materials (Creswell & Poth, 2013). Thus, these guidelines were followed in order to guarantee a comprehensive examination of the topics and to maximize the richness and diversity of the data collected.

3.2 Participants

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the perspectives of Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012, who are either students or recent graduates and have actively sought employment within the past year. This demographic is particularly relevant as they are in a critical phase of transitioning from academia to the professional sphere. The sampling approach aims to gather insights from participants who possess relevant experiences and perspectives related to the research questions. Hence, by intentionally selecting individuals familiar with the job-seeking process in the current year, the study ensures a focused and informed participant pool.

To guarantee a heterogeneous and representative sample, the recruitment process involved approaching individuals from various backgrounds. Efforts were made to include participants with different nationalities, genders, and academic disciplines. The inclusion criteria targeted

individuals aged 18 to 27 who are TikTok users, with no specific requirement regarding the frequency of app usage.

To gather the 16 participants for the study, a combination of non-probability sampling methods was employed. Initially, convenience sampling was used by reaching out to friends and other acquaintances (Sedgwick, 2013). Furthermore, snowball sampling was implemented by asking these initial contacts to recommend potential participants (Etikan, 2017). Nevertheless, to minimize bias, certain restrictions were applied: close family members and very close friends were not invited to participate but could name potential candidates for the study.

Despite the efforts to ensure diversity and representativeness, limitations were encountered in the recruitment process. The utilization of convenience and snowball sampling methods may have resulted in selection bias, as the participants were predominantly recruited from the researcher's social networks and initial contacts. This may lead to a sample that is not fully indicative of the wider Generation Z demographic, which might come with a higher risk of sampling error which can potentially lead to incorrect results.

3.2.1 Demographics of the Focus Group Participants

Both groups consisted of eight participants each, totaling sixteen individuals (Table 1).

Table 1

Focus Group Demographics

Focus Group 1		Focus Group 2	
Female	21	Female	20
Female	21	Female	22
Female	22	Female	24
Female	23	Female	24
Female	23	Male	22

Male	20	Male	22
Male	23	Male	24
Male	25	Male	24

Note: Demographics of research participants of both Focus Groups.

Nine females and seven males, all from Generation Z and currently job-seeking or having sought employment within the last 12 months. The participants had a wide range of academic backgrounds, including Psychology and Engineering, and came from a variety of countries, with the majority being from Germany (6), the Netherlands (3), and the United States (2). Table 3 displays the age distribution of the participants, which ranged from 20 to 25 years old. The distribution of genders consisted of about 56% female and 44% male.

3.3 Data collection

The two focus groups were conducted on May 13 and May 16, 2024, with each session lasting between 50 and 55 minutes, averaging 53 minutes. Both groups met face-to-face in a designated project room at the University of Twente.

To ensure ethical considerations were met, informed consent (Appendix B) was obtained digitally using an ipad. Informed consent involves a voluntary decision by an autonomous and capable individual, made after a thorough and informative process, to accept a specific treatment or experiment with an understanding of its nature, consequences, and risks (Ferreira & Serpa, 2018). Participants were invited to partake in the study through a brief text outlining the topic, procedure, and time frame of the study. They were required to tick checkboxes and provide their digital signature to confirm their consent. It was also assured to all participants that they could opt out of the study at any time. Additionally, participants were informed that their responses would be video recorded, and the recordings would be anonymized by retrieving the audio files and deleting the video after transcription. Furthermore, all stored data would be deleted upon the completion of the study.

3.3.1 Semi Structured Focus Group Guide

A semi-structured Focus Group Guide was employed to delve into Generation Z's perceptions of employer-branded content on TikTok. The guide is a tool used to strategically organize and execute the discourse of a focus group study, while leaving room for flexibility in the discussion (Stalmeijer et al., 2014). It allows for deliberate exploitation of group dynamics and helps in conceptualizing, moderating, and analyzing focus group results (Wibeck et al., 2007; Krueger & Casey, 2014). Hence, this approach provides a basis of initial coding schemes focusing on finding answer to the research questions (Krueger & Casey, 2014). The choice of sections was determined by the research questions and concepts of investigation. Therefore, the researcher guided the discussions, while also adding relevant supplementary questions when needed to gain a deeper understanding of their perspectives. The semi-structured guidelines for the focus groups were broken down into several sections:

- Introduction & Instructions

- First discussion round - TikTok Usage

- Example TikTok´s

- Second discussion round

- Perception of company TikToks

- Perception of company´s attractiveness

- Summary

A complete version of the guide used in this study can be found in the Appendix A. The guide began with an introduction round and contained questions regarding the participants' TikTok consumption, such as their main reasons for using TikTok and the types of content they consume. After a brief introduction to the topic of companies' employer branding efforts on TikTok, participants were exposed to 20 examples of employer-branded content on TikTok using an ipad provided. These examples provided participants with examples and served as a basis for the ensuing discussion.

The first focus of the discussion was the general perception of employer-branded content on TikTok, including questions as, "After seeing the companies' videos, what are your thoughts on them?" and "Have you ever come across such TikToks?" To delve deeper into the topic, follow-up questions were asked about the specific types of company content participants recognized, liked, and disliked. For instance, "What factors make company content on TikTok appealing to you?"

Lastly, the guide included questions regarding participants' perceptions of a company's attractiveness in relation to their TikTok content. Questions such as, "Do these videos create a desire to work at such a company?" were posed. At the end of the discussion, the main topics were summarized, the research questions were reiterated, and participants were invited to provide feedback, which was valuable for both the second focus group and the overall study.

3.3.2 Material

Participants viewed 20 high performing TikTok videos using an ipad provided. These selected examples were stored in a saved file on a TikTok account, which appeared to participants as a typical TikTok page. This setup allowed participants to decide when to scroll to the next video, mimicking a real usage experience. Mimicking the actual TikTok browsing experience was important to ensure that participants' reactions and interactions with the content were as natural and authentic as possible (Brennan, 2018).

The TikTok videos were selected based on industry reports highlighting high engagement and successful companies on TikTok over the past two years (Parker, 2023; Ishchenko, 2023; Swanson, 2024). For instance, Statista reported that one of the most popular brands on TikTok worldwide in 2022, by number of followers, was Duolingo (sentione, 2022). Another report by an Employer Branding Consultancy highlighted Google and specifically the popularity of the video format "day in the life of a Googler," which features current employees providing behind-the-scenes insights at their work at Google. These videos have garnered several million likes

(Parker, 2023). From these reports, efforts were made to select companies from various industries, including beauty, engineering, marketing, and others, as well as from different company sizes, such as large corporations, agencies, and small brands. Company sizes were classified based on the number of employees: small companies (fewer than 50 employees), medium companies (50-249 employees), and large companies (250 or more employees). This diverse selection was intended to capture a broad range of employer branding strategies and to ensure that the findings would be applicable across different sectors and organizational structures. By including a variety of companies, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how employer-branded content on TikTok resonates with Generation Z.
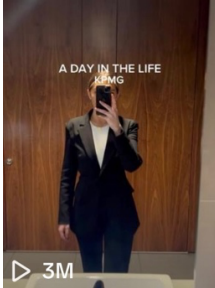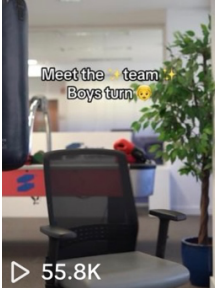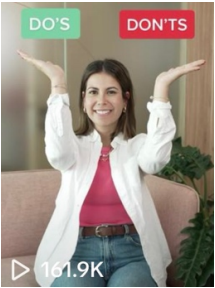
After identifying the companies, TikTok videos were chosen based on high view counts, ranging from 50,000 to 8.6 million views. Initially, 25 TikTok videos were selected and clustered into different types of content to provide a variety of examples. This clustering, based on the researcher's observation, included the following categories:

- Trends: Content focusing on popular and viral TikTok trends.

- Work Vlogs: Videos showcasing daily work routines and employee experiences.

- Behind-The-Scenes Footage: Insights into company operations and culture.

- Educational Content: Informative videos related to industry knowledge and skills.

To refine the selection, the initial 25 TikToks were reviewed by a peer. The peer was guided through the focus group guide, explaining the objectives and the relevance of the videos to the research questions. The peer review process involved evaluating the diversity, and representativeness of the videos concerning the research questions. In the next step, oral feedback was provided, suggesting that the viewing process was too lengthy and recommending reducing the number of videos to 20, as some trends were repetitive. This feedback was incorporated to ensure a more efficient and engaging viewing experience for participants. After this adjustment, the final selection consisted of 20 TikToks. Examples of TikTok videos used in the study, categorized by content type and company size, can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

Examples of Companies TikTok Selection

Content Category	Trends	Work-vlogs	Behind-The-Scenes	Educational
Company Size	Large company	Large company	Medium Company	Large company
Example Thumbnail				
QR Code				

Note: This table shows examples of TikTok videos used in the study, categorized by content type and company size. The QR Codes link directly to the videos for viewing.

Additionally, ethical considerations were taken into account. Participants were informed that the content they viewed was sourced from public TikTok accounts and that their responses would be anonymized. This approach ensured transparency and respect for both the content creators and the study participants.

3.4 Analysis

After conducting all focus groups, the video and audio recordings were securely stored in two separate archives. These recordings were then merged, transcribed, and anonymized to ensure the confidentiality of the participants. The resulting transcripts were used for a comprehensive analysis.

The coding process involved multiple steps and followed a predominantly inductive approach, supplemented by some deductive elements (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This was facilitated using Atlas.ti software. A codebook was developed, containing a set of categories and codes along with their definitions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Certain categories, such as "Demographics", "TikTok Usage", "Employer branding perceptions", "Liked Content", "Disliked Content" and "Company Attractiveness" were derived from both the focus group guide and the transcription process. The other categories and majority of subcodes, however, emerged during the transcript analysis, ensuring that the coding process was grounded in the data itself rather than predefined literature categories (Döring & Bortz, 2016).

To ensure the reliability of the coding process, an intercoder reliability test was conducted. According to Krippendorff (2018), reliability is the degree to which members of a designated community agree on the readings, interpretations, responses to, or uses of given texts or data. It is essential for researchers to demonstrate the trustworthiness of their data by measuring its reliability. In this study, a second coder independently coded approximately 10% of the data using the same codebook as the primary researcher. The results of the second coder were then compared with those of the initial coder using Krippendorff's alpha coefficient, which is a robust measure of inter-coder agreement suitable for qualitative data (Krippendorff, 2018). The whole codebook can be found in the Appendix C.

The intercoder reliability analysis in Atlas.ti resulted in a Krippendorff's alpha of 0.848. According to established guidelines, a cutoff point of $\alpha = 0.800$ indicates that 80% of the data is coded to a degree better than chance, representing a sufficient level of reliability. Following this validation, the remaining transcripts were coded by the primary researcher. The intercoder reliability test results, including the alpha values for each semantic domain (category) and the overall alpha value, can be found in Table 3.

Table 3

Intercoder Reliability Test Results

Category number	Category name	Krippendorff's alpha
1	Demographics	0.959
2	TikTok Usage	0.991
3	Employer Branding Perceptions	0.503
4	Liked Content	0.779
5	Disliked Content	0.783
6	Application Phase	1.000
7	Company Attractiveness	0.813
	In Total	0.848

Note: Intercoder Reliability Test Results based on Krippendorff's alpha.

These measures, including secure data storage, comprehensive transcription and anonymization, coding, and intercoder reliability testing, ensure a robust and credible analysis. The high level of intercoder reliability ensures that the results can be trusted and replicated.

4. Results

This section presents the findings structured according to the main themes that emerged from the analysis. The first theme, "TikTok Usage," serves as a foundational understanding of the app's relevance and usage by the participants rather than directly answering the research questions. As depicted in Figure 1, the five main themes that address the research questions are: "1. Employer Branding Perceptions," "2. Liked Content," "3. Disliked Content," "4. Recommended Content Strategy for Company TikToks," and "5. Company Attractiveness."

Figure 1

Visualization of themes and sub-themes
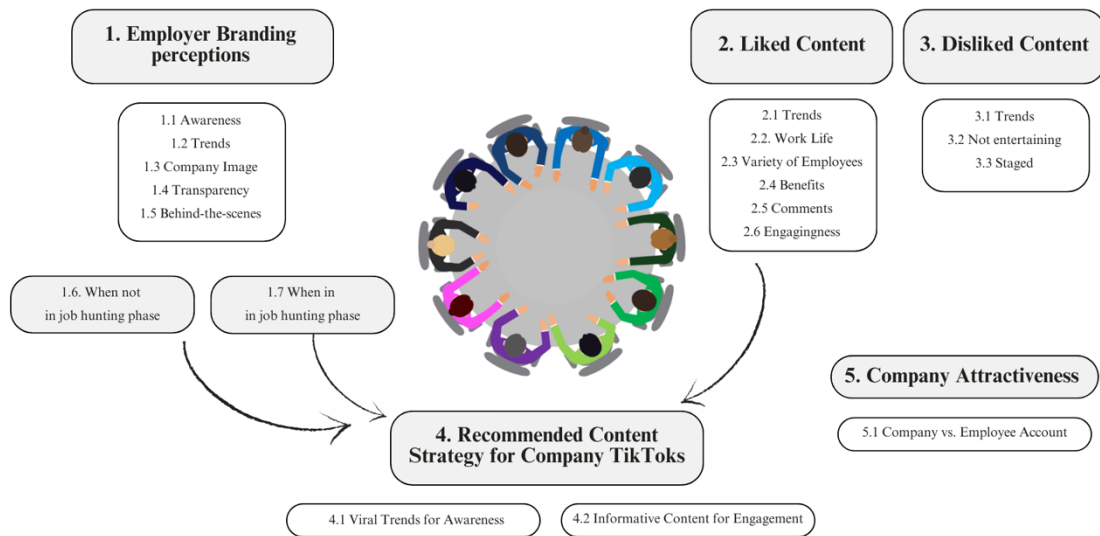
Note: This figure illustrates the five main themes and their corresponding sub-themes identified in the analysis, which are relevant for answering the research question. Themes related to demographics and TikTok usage are also included in the analysis but are not depicted here.

Each theme is further divided into sub-themes, providing a detailed view of the specific aspects discussed by the participants. Next to all subcodes, an additional theme "4. Recommended Content Strategy for Company TikTok's" emerged during the coding process, particularly from general perceptions and insights on their liked content, reflecting patterns and recommendations observed for employer-branded content on TikTok. This structure ensures a comprehensive understanding of the data and facilitates clear insights into the preferences and perceptions of the target audience.

4.1 TikTok Usage of the Participants

The analysis uncovered multiple motives for using the app, namely Entertainment, Boredom, and Research on particular topics (Table 4).

The tables in this results section offer detailed insights into the categories derived from the coding process, including example codes and their frequencies. Table 4 specifically presents the subthemes for the category "TikTok Usage," accompanied by illustrative quotes and the number of codes identified in the focus groups (n).

Table 4

TikTok Usage Motivations

TikTok Usage	Quotes	n of codes
Entertainment	*" Every day basically to keep up with trends and also to get entertained. And I also like to post TikToks myself."* *" I also use TikTok every day, but mostly for entertainment purposes."* *" I also use TikTok every day. For multiple hours. Probably and I mostly really enjoy getting entertained."*	10
Boredom	*"I also use TikTok, probably multiple hours a day and also just to get distracted when I'm bored."* *"I use it to cure boredom, and when I wake up and go to sleep."* *" So yeah, but the main reason is when I'm bored."*	8
Research	*"Even users use it as like a search engine because for, let it be travel, recommendations, food or I don't know what, I can find anything on it."* *" Instead of looking into travel blogs and things, I just went into the destination recommendations on TikTok."* *" I do think it works well for searching things. I think it's very visual and short. So like if you didn't like at the beginning of the five seconds, you can just go to the next video."*	6

Note: Participants reasons and motivations to be on the app.

The majority reported using the platform daily to view funny or engaging content, primarily to combat boredom. Several participants emphasized the importance of remaining informed about current trends on the app, and another rationale is to utilize TikTok as a search engine. For various interests, such as discovering travel, culinary, or fashion advice. For instance,

Participant 3 (Focus Group 1, female, 22) articulated their preference for TikTok over alternative platforms, stating,

"When I want to know about a certain topic, because I think you can really easily get information about something also explained very easily without the use of hard words."

This sentiment was echoed by several participants who appreciated TikTok's short, straightforward, and less polished content, which they found more accessible and easier to understand compared to other platforms. In addition, participant 6 (Focus Group 2, female, 22) added,

"I really have a feeling like I just have to think about something and my whole For You page changes and everything is just dedicated to this topic. On Instagram, I don't have the feeling that it changes that quickly."

This underscores their perception of TikTok having a unique algorithmic ability to quickly adapt to user interests, enhancing its appeal as a platform for tailored content consumption.

In conclusion, there was a recurring agreement on the app's ability to provide quick, digestible information, making it a preferred tool for learning about new topics and trends. Also, participants' usage patterns showed a trend towards favoring content that is both informative and entertaining, with a clear preference for content that is short and easy to understand.

4.2 Employer Branding Perceptions

The following chapter deals with the general perceptions and experiences of participants regarding employer-branded content on TikTok, including their overall opinions and examples they encountered (Table 5).

Table 5

Employer Branding Perceptions

Perceptions	Quotes	n of codes
Awareness	*"But I also have the feeling like when you're once on a company account and you really scroll through, my For You Page is full with it again."* *"I mean, there's a reason that I always when I think about brand awareness on TikTok, I think about prosieben. It's like the only thing in my head."*	6
Trends	*"But usually all it does in my what I see. Either it does really well or it just like has like two likes and nobody has viewed it."*	*7*
Company Image	*"I think it's interesting if they even post, what kind of content they have and if it attracts me and they like also present themselves."* *"I guess it says something about the company culture and the creativity of the people there, but for the job itself. Not really."*	*6*
Transparency	*"Because social media is so fake, at some point, it's nice to see when companies are being authentic and they're like, that's who we are. That's just that they're true to their image."*	5
Behind The Scenes	*"If it's a bigger company, I would for sure look at it and also when the company has TikTok, it's really cool to get an insight into how everything looks there, what people work there so."*	6

Note: Participants experiences and attitudes towards employer branding on TikTok.

First of all, it was observed that all participants were familiar with various types of employer-branded content on TikTok. After viewing the example TikToks, several participants recognized specific videos and accounts, such as Duolingo, Prosieben, Ryanair, Deutsche Bahn, and Google. This familiarity led to in-depth discussions on the content they had encountered.

The majority mentioned that trend content by companies was the most common type they encountered, while this type of content either performed exceptionally well or not at all, with few people seeing it. The reasons for that were explored in depth in the discussion on liked and disliked content, which findings will be presented in the upcoming chapters. However, participants noted that they generally do not encounter a lot of company content on their 'For You' page, while this is also depending on the current interests and life stage. Furthermore, there was a consensus that companies use TikTok to create awareness and present themselves to a younger audience. Participant 8 (Focus Group 1, male, 25) noted,

"And also they're taking part in trends and stuff to like, show. Yeah, just to present themselves."

The quotes and observations highlight a significant pattern: Participants were aware of the companies' efforts and motivations for posting on TikTok. They recognized that these activities are strategic marketing maneuvers aimed at promoting the company and its services, indicating that they are not merely passive consumers of content but are also perceptive about the underlying promotional intentions.

The sentiment towards companies being active on TikTok was generally positive, with participants describing it as "young" and "trendy." Participants appreciated companies' presence on TikTok when it was authentic, as it provided a refreshing contrast to the often-polished content commonly found on social media. Participant 8 (Focus Group 2, male, 24) encapsulated this sentiment by stating:

"Because social media is so fake, at some point, it's really nice to see when companies are being authentic and they're like, ok, that's who we are. Either you accept it or not."

Echoing this view, Participant 1 (Focus Group 1, female, 21) highlighted the shift in preferences towards more honest portrayals:

"I think we like now to see instead of brands being all protective and being all clean and shiny, we want the transparent view of what an organization is."

However, some participants disagreed that companies' content on TikTok can be truly authentic, arguing that it fails to provide a realistic representation of the company and instead reflects the efforts of the marketing team. For example, Participant 2 (Focus Group 1, female, 21) stated,

"It's also just the social media team of the company, and I don't want to work in that kind of niche. It doesn't represent the whole company."

Another point to consider is that participants generally showed more interest in content from larger corporations, citing reasons such as higher benefits and more impressive buildings. Nevertheless, the degree of interest depended on the job the participant was seeking. Those interested in marketing, HR, and similar fields were more likely to care about a company's TikTok presence, whereas those looking into engineering or management positions cared less. Moreover, there was agreement that traditional sources like company websites and LinkedIn are more reliable for gathering information about a company. They highlighted that while TikTok provides quick insights, it lacks depth, leading most participants to prefer traditional media for detailed information.

In conclusion, participants recognized and appreciated employer-branded content on TikTok, particularly when it was authentic and provided a more transparent view of the company. While they showed interest in these TikTok's, especially from larger corporations, they still preferred traditional platforms like websites and LinkedIn for more in-depth business interactions and information.

4.3 Perceptions During vs. Non Job-Hunting Phase

A notable pattern emerged during the analyses indicating that participants' perceptions of employer-branded content on TikTok varied, significantly depending on whether they were actively seeking a job or not. Again, examples of quotes can be viewed in Table 6.

Table 6

Perceptions during job hunting vs. Non-job hunting phase

Perceptions	Quotes	n of codes
When not in job hunting phase	*"Depends. I think when I am not actively needing a job right now, I am 99% of the time on TikTok for entertainment and then I really don't care about the brand."* *"When I'm not interested in a new job or to get to know a new company, I would probably just scroll because it's not that entertaining that I would watch it in my free time when I don't get a benefit from it."*	*5*
When in job hunting phase	*"When I was searching for an internship I was also sometimes even looking at content. And in that time, when it was on my for you page, I would look at it more consciously."* *"I think like when I'm really looking for a job or looking for a new company, then I would really watch the videos and also go on the account and look through all those stuff that were posted."*	8

Note: Participants perceptions towards employer branding on TikTok when in job-hunting phases or not.

When not in a job-hunting phase, participants primarily used TikTok for entertainment and exhibited little interest in employer-branded content. They tended to scroll past this type of content unless it provided immediate entertainment value. Participant 4 (Focus Group 2, female, 24) expressed this sentiment:

"Depends. I think when I am not actively needing a job right now, I am 99% of the time on TikTok for entertainment and then I really don't care about the brand."

There appeared to be a general apathy towards company content that lacked entertainment or offered clear benefits for the viewer. In these instances, participants showed a preference for trend-based content over behind-the-scenes or work-related videos, which they would often skip.

Conversely, during the job-hunting phase, participants reported engaging more thoughtfully with employer-branded content. They perceived such content as an easy accessible and valuable resource for information about potential employers, especially on the work environment and team culture.

These responses underline the trend: Participants were more likely to engage with and scrutinize employer-branded content when they were in the job-hunting phase, viewing it as a form of information-seeking about prospective employers. In contrast, when not seeking employment, they treated TikTok as a source of entertainment and showed limited interest in employer-branded content.

4.4 Liked Content

This section presents the findings on the content-related factors that made participants like employer-branded content on TikTok. While personal preferences varied, several patterns and trends emerged. Participants generally agreed that the content should be entertaining, engaging, and provide genuine insights into the company. There are five main subcategories that emerged during the coding: "Trends," "Benefits," "Work Life," "Variety of Employees," "Comments," and "Engagingness" (Table7).

Table 7

Liked Employer-Branded Content

Liked Content	Quotes	n of codes
Trends	*"Yeah sometimes trends for the brand can help that people who consume the content just know that this company exists."*	8
Work Life	*"I'm looking for an internship right now, and when I look up the social media platforms, I'm first of looking for like the work atmosphere, like the chemistry between the people."*	*14*
Variety of Employees	*"I also think it's funny when older people participate, like if it's for example a manager or whatever."*	13

	"Even if there's like an older person involved in the video that they're still doing the trend with younger people, that totally speaks for them because I'm like, ok, you're not like I'm conservative and old I do not participate. But whatever you're like, cool to me."	
Benefits	*"The Google example, it does make me want to work there because they have these benefits."* *"i've seen those TikToks and I am like great benefits. Would want to work there."*	5
Comments	*"I watch the TikTok sometimes like 10 times in a row just to read the all the comments because they are more funny than the actual video."*	5
Engagingness	*"Do like funny content, so it has to be like something I laugh about so I can like relate to."*	10

Note: This table presents the content-related factors and quotes that made participants like employer-branded content on TikTok.

Many participants enjoyed content that followed popular trends, as these were often entertaining and brought them joy. Participant 3 (Focus Group 2, female, 24) noted the importance of adapting to trends:

"To do like following the trends rather than exposing the brands. So I think that's good."

There was a consensus among participants that quickly and effectively adapting to trends significantly helps content appear on users' "For You" pages, thereby increasing both awareness and engagement. Their input demonstrated a thorough understanding of the platform's algorithms and mechanisms, indicating their digital savvy and awareness of how trending content can enhance visibility on TikTok.

Furthermore, the majority of participants valued content that showcased the work life, including interactions among employees, day-in-the-life videos, and glimpses of the office environment. There was a positive sentiment for personal, behind-the-scenes insights that are not available through a company's website or linkedin page. Participants appreciated seeing a

more unfiltered side of a company, including interactions between employees, casual moments, and the actual work environment, which helped them form a more genuine connection with the brand. For example, Participant 8 (Focus Group 2, male, 24) said,

"I already made some negative experiences related to that the like working atmosphere wasn't that good. So, for me it's really important that there is a good atmosphere and that's why I like the meet the team or work vlogs to like get some insights."

Hence, participants favored a diverse representation, especially featuring younger, Generation Z employees. This made the content more relatable from their viewpoint and gave a positive impression of the work environment. Participant 2 (Focus Group 1, female, 21) mentioned,

"The majority should be younger. You can just relate more and think it might be nice working with them."

Participants generally preferred content featuring Generation Z individuals but also appreciated a mix of ages. They particularly valued seeing managers involved in the content, as this demonstrated an open and positive work culture with low hierarchies.

Not only the representatives but also showcasing the benefits such as flexible working hours, good facilities, and other perks positively influenced their perceptions. Alternatively, participants found companies' comments on other people's TikToks amusing and engaging, but they did not view them as significant as other types of content.

Equally significant as the types of content, they favored, was the preferred style mentioned by the participants. They appreciated content that was engaging and relatable, often enjoying videos that made them laugh or that they could share with friends. Engaging content was generally characterized by fast, attention-grabbing editing. Participant 2 (Focus Group 1, female, 21) highlighted,

"But it was more because of the editing. They had some nice keyframe wrapping and that was really nice."

In conclusion, participants favored employer-branded content on TikTok that was trendy, engaging, and provided a genuine glimpse into the company's work life, benefits and people working there. Authenticity and relatability were key factors that influenced their positive perceptions.

4.5 Disliked Content

In this section, the results about the content-related factors that caused participants to dislike the employer-branded content on TikTok are illustrated. Three primary subcategories were identified during the coding process: "Trends," "Not Entertaining," and "Staged" (Table 8).

Table 8

Disliked Employer-Branded Content

Disliked Content	Quotes	n of codes
Trends	*"You really didn't have to post that. It's like you're just trying to post something, hoping you go viral."* *"And sometimes it doesn't make sense what they do like. Sometimes they follow a trend, but it in their context it isn't funny anymore."*	9
Not entertaining	*"Sometimes it's also about the editing of the video. Sometimes the editing is just **** or what they film is not engaging."* *"Sometimes the ideas of the videos were quite good, but like how they cut it, it was not the best Gen Z type or for the TikTok style is way too long. Text or in too long scenes. Instead of cutting fast."*	5
Staged	*"Sometimes to me they seem a bit like try hard, yeah."* *"I think it was kind of exhausting to like like to keep watching only the trendy videos now because it felt too staged having them only."*	6

Note: This table presents the content-related factors and quotes that made participants dislike employer-branded content on TikTok.

Despite the overall positive opinions on trend adaptations by companies, participants agreed that trend-based content should be current and relevant to the company's context. Otherwise, it would leave a negative impact. Participant 1 (Focus Group 2, female, 20) highlighted this issue:

"It's a bit boring when they really just copy like one to one, something that I already have seen 1000 times."

Participants emphasized the importance of timely and appropriate trend adaptation to ensure the content is liked and performing well. Furthermore, participants expressed their dislike for content that lacked engagement. Their interest was diminished by poor editing, excessive text, and long scenes. As outlined in the previous section, they preferred content with a fast-paced, Generation Z editing style that held their attention.

Another recurring theme was the dislike for staged content. Participants felt that forced or overly produced content lacked authenticity. Participant 4 (Focus Group 2, female, 24) stated:

"That's just when brands try too hard, it's like too forced to produce any content."

This is an important finding in the understanding of the participants' perceptions of employer-branded content on TikTok. Participants were particularly critical of content that felt forced, poorly edited, or irrelevant. This underscores the necessity for companies to carefully consider their approach to TikTok content creation. Ensuring that content is authentic, engaging, and well-adapted to current trends seems crucial for effectively engaging with the target audience on this platform. These minor details can significantly impact whether content is perceived positively or negatively, highlighting the fine line between successful and unsuccessful employer branding on TikTok.

4.6 Recommended Content Strategy for Companies TikTok

This section contains the insights from both focus groups regarding a strategic methodology for employer-branded content on TikTok. This advice is primarily based on the participants'

conclusions followed by the discussions on their liked content, as well as their perceptions when in- and out of the job-hunting phase.

Participants emphasized the importance of a diverse content mix, targeting both general audiences and potential job seekers. A key consensus was that companies should utilize a variety of content types on TikTok. As participant 2 (Focus Group 2, female, 22) noted,

"I think a variety of content is like the most important, like a bit of fun, but also like informative."

To achieve brand awareness, participants propose that companies should create content aimed at going viral by a fast adaption of trends. This type of content should help companies appear on the foryou page, thereby reaching a wider audience and attracting those who are not actively job hunting. Participants supported this strategy with comments such as,

"Trendy videos that go on the 'For You' page where you see them and you're like, haha funny are good for awareness." (Participant 4, Focus Group 1, female, 23)

On the other hand, participants agreed that companies should also create content that appeals to potential job seekers actively searching for information about the company. This content should authentically represent the work environment, benefits, and company culture. Participants suggested that companies should have informative videos for those who specifically look up the companies TikTok page. Participant 7 (Focus Group 1, male, 23) explains,

"I think that would be like a good mix to have, like a few that do end up on the For You page but also focus on like what if people look us up, like have some informative stuff,"

Participants appreciated content that introduced colleagues and provided insights into the working atmosphere, which would likely interest job seekers.

In conclusion, companies are advised by the participants to implement a dual-content strategy on TikTok: targeting viral trends to build brand awareness among the general audience, and providing informative, authentic content for potential job seekers. This approach might

ensure that companies maximize their reach and engagement on TikTok, while also catering to the specific needs and interests of different audience segments.

4.7 Company Attractiveness

The final section of the results addresses participants' opinions on how employer-branded content influences company attractiveness, including the desire to work there. Lastly, the differences in perceptions based on whether content is posted on a company or employee account are presented.

Regarding the perceived company attractiveness, opinions diverged in two main areas. Several participants expressed that authentic and engaging content positively influences their perception of a company's attractiveness. This sentiment was echoed by Participant 4 (Focus Group 1, female, 23), who found it appealing that a verified brand interacts with random content on their For You page:

"I also think it's funny that this brand that's also verified, sees that random person's content, so they're also scrolling on their For You'page or something."

Conversely, some participants felt that TikTok content does not significantly alter their perception of a company's attractiveness. One participant (Participant 5, Focus Group 2, male, 22) remarked,

"But like from my opinion, I would still not based on what I see there, see the brand like that differently. I think, oh, they're funny and they do like good marketing."

Participants expressed a nuanced view that familiarity with a company could moderate the influence of its content. Some participants noted that while a first impression might be influential, a single video is insufficient to form a lasting opinion. Participants consistently emphasized the need for a variety of content types to form a positive impression of a company. As Participant 2 (Focus Group 1, female, 21) stated,

"When you see the informative videos and then in combination with some entertaining videos that you see that people are really nice there and are funny and that it's like their own work culture. Then I would have the desire to work there but not from only one video."

This reinforces the previously outlined findings that a combination of entertaining and informative content can effectively convey a company's work culture and enhance its attractiveness to potential employees. Hence, while TikTok content can positively influence a company's attractiveness, this effect is contingent on various factors like the authenticity, variety, and relevance of the content.

This final section presents findings on the differences in perceptions based on whether employer-branded content is posted on a company or employee account. There was a congruent view among participants regarding the reliability of content based on its source (Table 9).

Table 9

Content Posted on Company vs. Employee Account

Content Posted on	Quotes	n of codes
Company Account	*"If I see the company posted it, I know that they like meant for it to go viral and meant to like enhance the brand." "Also that if you see the TikTok, you just know that a social media team sat down before and was like OK, any ideas on what TikTok we can do next and how about this trend? Like they sat down and they're actively thinking about how to reach their target audiences." "I feel like everything that's done on the company account just shows that this person was paid doing it."*	6
Employee Account	*" If I see someone for example, post something but not on the company account, I'm like oh, she's showing us around. So it is her honest opinion." "I feel like when the employees themselves post, it feels like ok, they really like the job. It's not like they have to post this"*	5

Note: This table presents the content-related factors and quotes that made participants dislike employer-branded content on TikTok.

Participants generally believed that content posted on a company's account gives the impression of a marketing strategy and feels less authentic. For instance, Participant 4 (Focus Group 1, female, 23) remarked,

"I think I would automatically skip faster on a company's account."

This suggests a tendency to view company-posted content as strategically crafted, leading to skepticism about its authenticity. Conversely, content posted on private employee accounts was perceived as more "reliable" and "honest." For example, Participant 8 (Focus Group 2, male, 24) stated,

"It's also more personal because they show us something else and not like necessarily staged TikToks like the other ones do that hop on some trends."

This perception underscores a preference for the personal touch and perceived genuineness of employee-shared content. Hence, this highlights a consistent pattern where the source of the content significantly affects its perceived authenticity.

In conclusion, while company-posted content tends to be viewed as less authentic, employee-posted content is perceived as more personal and reliable.

5. Discussion

5.1 Main findings

This study aimed to uncover the perceptions of Generation Z towards employer-branded content on TikTok. As previous literature proposed positive effects of employer branding strategies on social media (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004), this study aimed to investigate whether similar effects can be found on TikTok for attracting Generation Z. The results served to answer one main and two sub-questions, which will now be discussed in greater detail.

RQ1: *How is employer-branded content on TikTok perceived by Generation Z actively seeking employment?*

The findings indicate that Generation Z's perception of employer-branded content on TikTok is multifaceted but generally positive. The majority appreciated companies showing their authentic selves on the platform compared to traditional sites. This preference can be attributed to the nature of TikTok, which is known for its less polished and more authentic content, aligning well with Generation Z's values of authenticity and transparency (O'Laughlin, 2008). Perhaps one of the most striking finding is that, participants who were actively seeking employment viewed TikTok content as a valuable source of information about potential employers. They appreciated content that provided insights into the work environment, company culture, benefits, and employee experiences. As in other studies which apply the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the results for TikTok underline a rational explanation, that if Generation Z users perceive videos as providing useful information (perceived usefulness) about the workplace, they develop a more positive attitude (Al-Khasawneh et al., 2022). In contrast, non-job seekers preferred trend content for entertainment, which aligns with the primary reason younger audiences use the app (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). This bifurcation highlights the importance of tailoring content to the audience's current needs and interests, which matches observations in earlier studies (Smith & Gallicano, 2015).

Another significant finding was the discernible difference in perceptions based on whether the content was posted on a company or employee account. Employee posted content was generally perceived as more authentic and reliable, whereas company posted content was often viewed as part of a marketing strategy. This finding of the study is consistent with previous research by Schivinski and Dabrowski (2014) emphasizing that user-generated content is often more influential than company-generated content. It reveals that Generation Z is highly attuned to the authenticity of content and skeptical of overt marketing efforts, as in traditional advertising. Other studies on advertisements impact on Generation Z point out similar aspects and explain that their consciousness and ability to discern companies' strategies used on social

media is related to Generation Zs superiority in technology use and exposure to many advertising messages (Mohamed, 2022; Wolburg & Pokrywczynski, 200).

RQ2: *What content-related factors contribute to Generation Z's positive and negative perceptions of employer-branded content on TikTok?*

Several content-related factors contributed to Generation Z's perceptions. Participants favored content that was engaging, relatable, and authentic. They liked when companies adapted to current trends and appreciated when they provided behind-the-scenes looks of the work environment. Transparency was highly valued, and participants enjoyed seeing a variety of employees, especially when higher-ups participated in content creation, which indicated an open and inclusive work culture. These preferences can be further explained by findings of other research that points out that Generation Z has more worries about social corporate practices related to the creation of a supportive work environment, therefor appreciating insights in the team culture (Narayanan, 2022; O'Laughlin, 2008). Conversely, content that felt forced, poorly edited, or irrelevant was met with criticism. Participants disliked content that was overly staged or failed to align with current trends effectively. Surprisingly, the most discussed content format was trends, mentioned in both liked and disliked contexts, highlighting that minor details could significantly influence perceptions.

RQ3: *How does employer-branded content on TikTok influence Generation Z's view of a company's attractiveness as a potential employer?*

Employer-branded content on TikTok can have an influence Generation Z's view of a company's attractiveness. Authentic, well-executed content that showcases a positive work environment and strong company culture can enhance a company's appeal. Conversely, content that appears contrived or poorly executed can detract from a company's attractiveness. The findings of this study are consistent with previous research on social media marketing and employer branding. For instance, Smith and Gallicano (2015) highlighted the importance of authenticity in social media engagement.

However, opinions differed on how strongly they would care about a company's TikTok presence. Depending on the job segment, it might not strongly influence them, as the content does not necessarily seem to represent the job people would end up doing.

Overall, the findings strongly encourage larger companies to leverage TikTok as a platform for employer branding to attract Generation Z. The ability to reach a broad audience with authentic, engaging content can significantly enhance a company's attractiveness to potential employees. Furthermore, the distinct advantage of TikTok lies in its capacity for viral content, which can amplify a company's employer brand beyond traditional boundaries.

5.2 Implications

This study contributes to the body of literature on social media usage and employer branding, particularly with regard to Generation Z's interactions with TikTok. By applying the Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G) and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the study deepens our understanding of how Gen Z perceives and engages with employer-branded content on TikTok. The findings underscore the importance of perceived usefulness and ease of use in shaping positive attitudes towards employer branding among Gen Z. Additionally, the study highlights the role of TikTok in employer branding efforts, which should be seen as an additional medium for providing insightful information that are not depicted on companies' traditional media. This research enriches the theoretical framework by integrating these insights and demonstrates the relevance of U&G and TAM in contemporary social media contexts.

The practical implications of this study are particularly relevant for companies aiming to enhance their employer branding strategies on TikTok. The findings suggest that companies could benefit from implementing a dual-content strategy that includes the creation of both viral trends and informative content. By engaging with viral trends, companies can build brand awareness among the general audience, increasing visibility and engagement. This type of

content aligns with TikTok's algorithm, ensuring that the brand appears on users' "For You" pages, thereby maximizing reach. Importance lies on trend-based content that is current and relevant to the company's context, or it can leave a negative impact.

On the other hand, providing informative and authentic content is crucial for appealing to potential job seekers. Participants indicated a preference for content that offers behind-the-scenes insights and portrays a genuine view of the company culture.

Moreover, the study indicates that participants value a mix of age groups in the content, including managers, to reflect an open and positive work culture with low hierarchies. This suggests that companies should diversify their content to include employees from various age groups, levels and departments, showcasing a collaborative and inclusive environment.

In summary, a strategic approach that combines trend-driven, entertaining content with detailed, authentic portrayals of the workplace can effectively attract young talent. This dual-content strategy not only aligns with the preferences of Generation Z but also enhances the overall employer branding efforts on TikTok, ensuring a competitive edge in the digital landscape.

5.3 Limitations

Like many studies, this study has certain limitations and areas for development. Nevertheless, these can serve as a starting point for recommendations for future research. First, caution must be applied, as with a small sample size (n= 16), the findings may not be reproducible on a wide scale across Generation Z. Hence, the limited sample size could impact the generalizability of the findings, and the self-reported nature of the data might introduce biases. In addition, itt is crucial to recognize the limitations associated with collecting data using semi-structured focus groups. Semi-structured focus groups are invasive as they necessitate participants to disclose their attitudes, which might overtly affect their responses. Furthermore, the interviews are impacted by the specific circumstances in which they take place and the

interpersonal dynamics between the person guiding the focus groups and the participants. Ultimately, the manner in which questions were formulated and the researcher's understanding of participants' answers may have influenced the trajectory and results of the study.

5.4 Suggestions for future research

A potential idea for future research would be to apply the design of this study to a large sample with a greater emphasis on quantitative analysis. Future research could quantitatively test the effectiveness of different types of employer-branded content on TikTok. Content performance could be tested on a broader scale and engagement metrics could be analyzed. Additionally, it is recommended to constantly test the effectiveness of such approaches, as such fast paced platform necessitates ongoing adaption. While this study served as a first exploration of the influence of TikTok for companies, future steps need to be taken to broaden the knowledge about TikTok as a new platform for companies.

5.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how Generation Z perceives employer-branded content on TikTok. Authenticity, engagement, and the insights provided in the content are crucial factors influencing these perceptions. Companies might benefit from adopting a dual content strategy to maximize their appeal to both passive viewers and active job seekers. Especially larger companies are advised to encouraging employees to share authentic, behind-the-scenes content to complement the more polished content posted on traditional company sites. This approach could enhance positive perceptions among Generation Z and foster a more authentic company image than on traditional platforms.

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During the preparation of this work, I used "chatgpt" to help me with the formulation of sentences. After using this tool, I thoroughly reviewed and edited the content as needed, taking full responsibility for the final outcome.

6. Appendix

A. Semi Structured Focus Group Guide

Amount of participants:

Female:

Male:

Duration:

Location:

Procedure

Start Recording

1. Introduction & Instructions

In this study, we want to understand how you, as a member of Generation Z, view companies content on TikTok, to formulate recommendations for companies to approach you. I will introduce you to the topic and you'll get to watch some TikTok videos that are known to be engaging. Then, we'll have discussions where you can share your thoughts, feelings, and opinions openly.

Your data is only for my Bachelor Thesis, your participation is entirely voluntary, and you can choose to stop at any time. Thank you for participating and now let us dive in.

I would like to start with a small introduction of everybody.

     Name

     Age

     TikTok Usage

I will start. I am Chiara, 22 years old. I am on TikTok each day to keep up with trends and get entertained. I also like to post content on TikTok myself about my work & uni life.

2. TikTok Usage

    What are your main reasons to use the app TikTok?

    What content do you watch on TikTok?

        Do you mainly watch content of the people you follow, or random content from the fyp?

        Are you searching for specific content on TikTok? (topics, tips…)

3. Introduction Employer Branding

    Definition:

    Employer branding is a strategy to position your organisation as the 'employer of choice' for both your current employees (as a retentionmeasure) and prospective candidates (as an attraction strategy). On one hand, it's an internal strategy to help boost retention and employee referral rates. On the other, it's an external strategy to attract top talent to your organisation.

    Do you think you have ever come across employer branding on social media? If yes, how and on which platform?

4. Showing well performing TikTok´s of companies

   Participants view approximately 20 well-performing TikToks created by employees, using an ipad provided

5. Perception of the TikToks

   After seeing the companies videos, what are your thoughts on them?

        Follow up in case they don´t know what to say

   What would be your natural reaction to seeing such a TikTok while scrolling? (e.g. Scrolling, liking, sharing, checking out the account) Why?

   Have you ever come across such TikToks? Do they feel familiar?

   Was there ever a company that aroused your interest on TikTok?

   What type of content do you come across from companies? (e.g. Funny videos, Trends, benefits, day in the life, office life…)

   Which of these types do you enjoy seeing most?

   What factors make company content on TikTok appealing to you?

        What people should be shown? (young/ old, good looking…)

        Are trending sounds or music important?

   What companies do you think are interesting to see on TikTok? (marketing agencies, big corporates, small brands)

6. Application Phase

   When you want to apply for a company, do you check out their social media channels? If yes, why and which?

How would a company's content need to be for you to apply for the job? (What kind of content? Mood: serious or fun?)

When you are in an application phase, do you come across more company content than usual?

> Were you searching for it?

Do you think TikTok is a good place to search for job related content?
If yes, what do you search for?

When you are in not an application phase, do you care less about company's content on TikTok?

7. Perception of company´s attractiveness

Do these videos influence how much you like a company?

Do these videos influence your consideration of working there?

Do these videos create desire to work at such a company?

Are there types of content that create more desire and others less?

Does it makes a difference if the content is posted by a company or by an employee account? (Regarding reliability or engagingness) Why?

8. Summary

Do you have anything to add to this?

B. Informed Consent Form

<div align="center">

Consent Form – Focus Group
Nailing Employer Branding on TikTok –

</div>

Attracting GenZ in the Job Market

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS INFORMED CONSENT FORM

In this study, we want to understand how you, as a member of Generation Z, view employer-branded content on TikTok. Employer branded content is content created by employees to inform and influence how people perceive the experience of working at the organization. In the focus group session you get to watch TikTok videos, chosen for their reported success and high engagement rates. Then, we'll have discussions where you can share your thoughts, feelings, and opinions openly. Our goal is to learn what makes you think positively about employer branding and if it influences your career choices. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you can choose to stop at any time.

Please tick the appropriate boxes	Yes	No
Taking part in the study		
I have read and understood the study information dated [30/04/2024], or it has been read to me. I have been able to ask questions about the study and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.	□	□
I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions and I can withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason.	□	□
I understand that taking part in the study involves responding a few questions to give insights on their research questions that focuses on employer branded content on TikTok. As well as being video recorded for the purpose of transcribing the discussion. The recordings and transcripts will be anonymous and deleted after the study.	□	□
Use of the information in the study		
I understand that information I provide will be used for a university project. The project will be published in the university internally.	□	□
I understand that personal information collected about me that can identify me, such as name, age, and study program will not be shared beyond the study team.	□	□
I agree that my information can be quoted in research outputs	□	□
Consent to be audio and video Recorded	□	□
I agree to be audio and video recorded. Yes/no		

I give up any rights to the video recording and understand that the recording may be used for the purposes described in this consent form without further permission.

I understand that if for any reason I do not want to continue I can leave at any time during this recording session.

Signatures

_____   _____   _____

Name of participant   Signature   Date

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant and, to the best of my ability, ensured that the participant understands to what they are freely consenting.

Chiara Heimann   _____   _____

Researcher name [printed]   Signature   Date

Study contact details for further information:

Chiara Heimann

C. Codebook

Category	Code Name	Code description	Example
Demographics	Demographics	Gender and age of the participants.	*"I am 22 years old."*
TikTok Usage	Entertainment Distraction Boredom Search engine	The participants time spent on the app, their reasons the be on the app, as well as the type of content they watch there.	*"I also use TikTok everyday, but mostly for entertainment purposes. Sometimes I post Tik toks myself, but yeah, also mainly just for fun and yeah, distraction I guess."*

1. Employer Branding - Perceptions	1.1 Awareness 1.2 Trends 1.3 Company Image 1.4 Transparency 1.5 Behind the scenes	The participants experience with employer branding on TikTok and their opinions on it. As well as examples they came across.	"…there's a girl who always shows her work day at Google. And I think it's mainly there to like, attract the people to stay there for longer hours and stuff."
Application Phase vs non-Application Phase	1.6 Perception when on job hunt 1.7 Perception when not on job hunt	The participants differences in opinions and awareness on company content on TikTok when in an application phase and when not.	"For me, I'm looking for an internship right now, and when I look up the social media platforms, I'm first off looking for like the work atmosphere, like the chemistry between the people and if I'd like to, interact with them basically."
2. Liked Content on TikTok	2.1 Trends 2.2 Work Life 2.3 Variety of employees 2.4 Benefits 2.5 Comments 2.6 Engagingness	Examples of types of company content they identified and like to see.	"Also, I like if in the TikTok the manager is like doing the TikTok with the other people, because I don't know that kind of shows that the manager is kind of cool and I am always like nice. I would like to have that manager."
3. Disliked Content on TikTok	3.1 Trends 3.2 Not entertaining 3.3 Staged	Examples of types of company content they don´t like to see.	"And sometimes it doesn't make sense what they do like. Sometimes they follow a trend, but it in their context it isn't funny anymore. Or something like it's not. Or maybe not relatable to me at least."
4. Recommended Content Strategy for Companies	4.1 Viral trends for awareness 4.2 Informative Content for Engagement	The participants recommendations for companies.	"Trendy videos that go on the 'For You' page where you see them and you're like, haha funny are good for awareness."
5. Company attractiveness	5.1 Company attractiveness	Participants opinion on contents influence on a	" So it doesn't seem like it's a real brand

	5.2 Employee vs. Company	companys attractiveness and the desire to work there.	*behind it, but you can actually see that there's a person writing it and that makes the brand more attractive, kind of."*