

Hungary's Gen Z Workforce: Analysing Youth Perspectives on Employer Branding and Their Perception of the National Job Market

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This paper discusses Generation Z's perception of communication strategies used by companies in Hungary for employer branding and their expectations from prospective employers. The study applies a mixed method approach, with qualitative and quantitative techniques that combine six focus group interviews and an online survey with young people aged 18 to 26 (N = 156). Our findings indicate that Generation Z favors workplace values over salaries and expects personalized job descriptions and a deep understanding of company culture, usually acquired with peers or at job fairs. However, different subgroups within Generation Z have varying job preferences and motivations. Finally, these findings offer insights into employer branding strategies that can contribute to companies in Hungary to attract and retain younger workers.

Keywords: Generation Z, Hungary, job market, employer branding, youth studies

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1. Introduction

The contemporary Hungarian job market has been characterized by continual transformations over the past 50 years, with changes in the political regime in the 1990s, ascension to the European Union, and more recently with the COVID-19 pandemic. Parallely, new generations have become part of the workforce, making it imperative to gain a comprehensive understanding of the expectations, beliefs, and experiences of emerging generations. Particularly, the Hungarian job market is now opening its doors to Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012 (Tari, 2010), distinguished by their unique values and expectations in contrast to preceding generations (Downs, 2019). To effectively engage and retain this generation, employers must grasp their distinctive priorities and preferences.

Communication strategies are essential in addressing the varied preferences of different generational cohorts, encompassing aspects such as frequency, style, speed, and channels (Edwards, 2020). In the contemporary labor market, four generations coexist: Baby Boomers (1946-1964), Generation X (1965-1980), Millennials (1981-1996), and Generation Z (1997-2012), each characterized by distinct communication preferences (Downs, 2019). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has precipitated shifts in working culture, prompting changes in communicative practices and expectations (de Lucas Ancillo et al., 2020).

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This research initiative seeks to investigate Generation Z's perceptions of communication strategies employed by companies in Hungary through social media channels for employer branding, as well as their expectations of prospective workplaces. Employing a methodological framework that combines personal focus group interviews (Morgan, 1997) with an online survey (Dillman et al., 2014), this study sampled participants from the active Hungarian labor market who belong to Generation Z. Consequently, this research employs both qualitative and quantitative approaches to comprehensively explore the phenomenon, ensuring a consistent sample size for analysis. Statistical analysis is applied to the quantitative data, while narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993) is employed for the qualitative data.

The study's research questions center on the significance of flexibility and work-life balance in Generation Z's decision-making processes, the factors influencing their workplace preferences, their expectations concerning job advertisements, and the credibility of sources they rely on for information about potential employers. The findings obtained from both the survey and focus group interviews reveal the trend toward earlier employment among younger members of Generation Z, and that different subgroups within the group have varying job preferences and motivations to start working. In the next subsections, we define and discuss characteristics that mark the studied young generation, as well as how employer branding has developed over the past years and its role in companies' communication strategies.

Generation characteristics

Generations are defined as people within a delineated population who experience the same significant events within a given time (Pilcher, 1994). According to Tari (2010), there are four main generations currently in the job market, corresponding to Baby Boomers (1946-1964), Generation X (1965-1980), Generation Y (1981-1996), Generation Z (1997-2012). According to John Palfrey and Urs Gasser (2008), there is a shared cultural connection among youth, whose life is predominantly influenced and mediated by digital technologies. As they have come of age in the digital era, they do not relate to a time when analogical forms of communication were predominant.

However, this younger group has been addressed with distinct nomenclatures across the body of literature, thus without consensus to delimit an age or social behavior and cultural practices that would unify them. Hence, we observe multiple terminologies to relatively similar groups, which can vary between authors, including Generation Z – born between 1993 and 2005 (Turner, 2013) or born from 1997 onward (Dimock, 2019; Tari, 2010), Net Generation – born in the internet age (Tapscott, 1998; 2009), Digital Generation (used by Livingstone, 2018, without a specific age limit), among others.

Therefore, in this research, we refer to the studied public as Generation Z for practical reasons based on their age and the phenomenon we analyze, but we acknowledge the multiple classifications that this generation receives. The name “Z” derives from the English word “zappers”, in reference to technology usage behaviour, but they are also part of distinct demographics and share social habits. For instance, Ferincz and Szabó (2012) indicate that young people were born in mostly one-child families, thus reflecting a more isolated environment for growing up where many didn't have direct siblings to “team play”. Additionally, they started school earlier in life and distinct digital devices

(i.e., TVs, videogames, computers, smartphones) were part of their daily activities. Therefore, they have become “socially, technologically the most independent, most empowered generation of all time” (Ferincz & Szabó, 2012). Moreover, Tari (2011) describes that young people can multitask and perform many parallel projects, but this may result in difficulties with memorization and reduced attention span.

Market research data indicates that 26 percent of the global population belongs to Generation Z (Wise, 2023), while companies around the world are faced with challenges in recruiting and retaining workers of this group (Wingard, 2021). Therefore, employers must regularly adapt their branding strategies to effectively address the problem and communicate with the younger workforce. Additionally, another study from the Pew Research Center (Parker & Igielnik, 2020) indicated that younger workers were more vulnerable to job loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study shows that nearly 50 percent of Gen Z-ers reported being affected by financial changes brought about by the coronavirus, resulting in themselves or someone in their household losing work or having to reduce their income as a consequence of the pandemic.

In Hungary, the job posting platform Zyntern.com (Túri, 2021) conducted a survey during the COVID-19 pandemic to investigate the needs and wants of Generation Y and Z (N = 4,000) who were about to enter the market. Most respondents (32 percent) informed that they would like to work at their first job for up to 5 years, followed by those who consider staying between one and two years (24.8 percent) or around three years (23.7 percent). The research also reveals that young people value a positive workplace atmosphere when choosing where to apply for, and prefer responsible, independent work and creative development over tasks that do not involve much responsibility. In the next section, we discuss some challenges and opportunities for companies to communicate with Generation Z, while discussing aspects of employer branding.

Employer branding

Employer branding refers to a concept rooted in marketing principles that involve shaping Human Resources (HR) practices for current and potential employees, thus mixing communication and HR characteristics. This type of branding treats current and potential employees as the target audience to generate a positive employer reputation and result in more competitiveness when attracting or recruiting new hires or reducing turnover (Figurska & Matuska, 2013). In this sense, employer branding “entails controlling a company's image as viewed through the eyes of its associates and potential hires” (Martin & Beaumont, 2003:15).

The success of employer branding strategies is influenced by many factors. For instance, adapting to changes in the economy and client demands is essential for gaining a competitive advantage, according to Figurska and Matuska (2013). Demographic shifts, evolving HR competencies, and employee attitudes are also relevant, particularly concerning the challenges of attracting and retaining top talent in a declining working-age population with varying perceptions of work importance. Furthermore, globalization has become another relevant factor in employer branding, as businesses can operate on a global scale. In connection with that, communication is now more pervasive, as employees may use online platforms to share their opinions with a wide

and international audience about their work experiences and relationships with companies.

In this context of constant changes, the development of an organization's brand could contribute to attracting and retaining young talent who would contribute to the company's mission. To achieve this, Menor (2010) recommends strategies such as maintaining a healthy work-life balance, offering competitive compensation packages, fostering open communication, and eliminating favouritism. Additionally, placing the right employees for each position, recognizing their achievements, and providing workplace flexibility may result in higher employee satisfaction and retention.

Based on Sullivan (2004), there are eight components that could lead to successful employer branding, which are: 1) Creating a culture of sharing and continuous improvement, 2) balancing effective management practices and productivity initiatives, 3) seeking public recognition on lists of great places to work and in local media, 4) motivating employees to share their positive experiences, 5) having managers actively communicate their management techniques, 6) aiming at being a benchmark company with identifiable great practices, 7) increasing awareness of the company's strengths, and 8) incorporating branding assessment metrics into company activities and using the results for continuous development.

Despite these propositions for strategic employer branding, Generation Z brings new challenges for companies, as they tend to be highly tech-savvy and favor quick online communication while struggling with long-term memory. Additionally, previous research (Valentine, 2021) has indicated that these young professionals have different values and priorities than previous generations, focusing more on work-life balance and being realistic or skeptical of employer-employee relationships. However, not much has been investigated in communication science about this generation in Hungary. Therefore, this research investigates how Generation Z perceives communication strategies from companies in Hungary shared on social media for employer branding and what they expect from their prospective workplaces. In the next section, we clarify the methodological approach taken in the study, exposing the data collection and data analysis processes.

2. Research methodology

From a methodological perspective, the study applies six personal focus group interviews (N = 37) with the addition of an online survey (N = 156). The participants were chosen from a pool of members of the Hungarian active labour market who belong to Generation Z (18-25 years old). Thus, the research combines qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the phenomenon in-depth and to gain a consistent sample size for analysis. For the latter, we conducted statistical analysis, while narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993) is used to investigate the qualitative data. In this section, we expose and explain these procedures.

Firstly, focus groups and online surveys are two common data collection methods used in social science research (Dillman et al., 2014). A focus group is a qualitative research technique that involves a small group of participants who take part in a facilitated conversation about a specific subject. A moderator guides the discussion and encourages group members to express their thoughts, opinions, and attitudes. Morgan (1997) explains that this method is frequently used to investigate social and behavioral issues and to learn about preferences and opinions. As for online

surveys, a questionnaire is sent to a target population via the Internet to collect data, enabling quick and effective access to information (Dillman et al., 2014).

These methodologies are efficient for collecting qualitative and quantitative data from a large sample size, thereby enabling researchers to gain valuable insights into a variety of topics. Each method has its own benefits and drawbacks, and researchers frequently combine the two to gain a comprehensive understanding of a subject. According to Morgan et al. (2017), combining surveys and focus groups can help reveal patterns and relationships between variables, which can result in a more complete picture of the research topic. The authors point out that while focus groups can offer insights into the meanings and interpretations of these findings, surveys are useful for comprehending prevalence rates and identifying correlations.

Focus groups

The focus group interviews were conducted in Budapest and involved a total of 37 participants, who were divided into six separate sessions based on their work experience (no experience, less than two years of experience, and more than two years of experience), with each session lasting 90 minutes. To create a comfortable environment for the volunteers, they were provided with snacks and drinks during the discussions. Each focus group interview aimed to consist of six to eight participants, allowing for in-depth discussions on the subject, and there were two sessions for each work category. All interviewees were between the ages of 18 and 25 and were selected from a network of student organizations with which one of the authors worked during the research. The participants were contacted via email and social media and provided with comprehensive information regarding the research.

An assistant took notes during the focus group sessions, and another person moderated the conversation. Word-for-word transcription of the notes ensured that every participant's comment was captured. After that, the notes were arranged and coded to look for any patterns or connections and the responses were categorized into various themes or topics. To analyze the data, we applied narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993), which includes four steps. Firstly, the author advises researchers to fully transcribe interviews before looking for narrative themes in the text. The second step is for researchers to pinpoint the crucial narrative components, such as the plot, characters, and setting. Third, researchers should investigate how these narrative components are connected to one another to form a complete story. Finally, scholars should consider the story's underlying themes and significance.

Survey

After the focus groups stage, we conducted an online survey among the members of a student organization to collect information regarding the opinions and experiences of respondents regarding the Hungarian job market. The survey consisted of 25 multiple-choice (19) and open-ended (6) questions designed on Google Forms that took approximately 10-15 minutes to complete and was open for approximately three weeks, registering 156 responses. The questions focused on a range of topics, including participants' experiences in the job market, their expectations of their

future employers, and the factors that influenced their decision-making process when looking for a job. In this paper, we provide only the results connected to employer branding and communication preferences, in addition to contextual information about the start of their careers.

The gender distribution was split fairly evenly in the group, with only a small percentage indicating they were of another gender. According to the respondent's level of education, the majority were either working towards a bachelor's or master's degree. Additionally, over two-thirds of them had professional experience, demonstrating that they were either actively seeking employment at the time of the survey or already had some professional experience.

Overall:

- 55.8 percent of respondents are aged 22-25, while 44.2 percent are 18-21.
- 51.9 percent of respondents are female, while 46.8 percent are male, and 1.3 percent indicated their gender as other.
- 42.3 percent of respondents are pursuing a master's degree, while 47.4 percent are pursuing a bachelor's degree, and 10.3 percent are no longer attending university.
- 67.3 percent of respondents have professional experience, while 32.7 percent do not.

It is worth noting that the sample was limited to Hungarian respondents only. While this provides insight into the attitudes and beliefs of Hungarian members of Generation Z, it may not be generalizable to other countries or cultures. However, given that the study focused on the Hungarian job market, limiting the sample to Hungarian respondents was appropriate and necessary.

3. Results

The data analysis regarding when Generation Z prefers to start working reveals some trends in their responses. For example, those with work experience indicated that the best time would be in the 5th-6th semester, while those without experience, typically younger, favor the 3rd-4th semester. This suggests that individuals with previous experience may prioritize their studies before entering the job market, which could be due to personal preferences, family expectations, or a desire to concentrate on their studies.

The data also suggests that many of these students have plans to enter the workforce during their 3rd or 4th semester of college. Thus, by focusing efforts on engaging with students early on in their university journey, companies can establish connections and build relationships with prospective employees from Generation Z. This approach allows organizations to proactively communicate their employer brand, values, and career opportunities, therefore capturing the attention and interest of these students as they begin to explore their future career paths.

Figure 1. When is it ideal to start your first professional job?

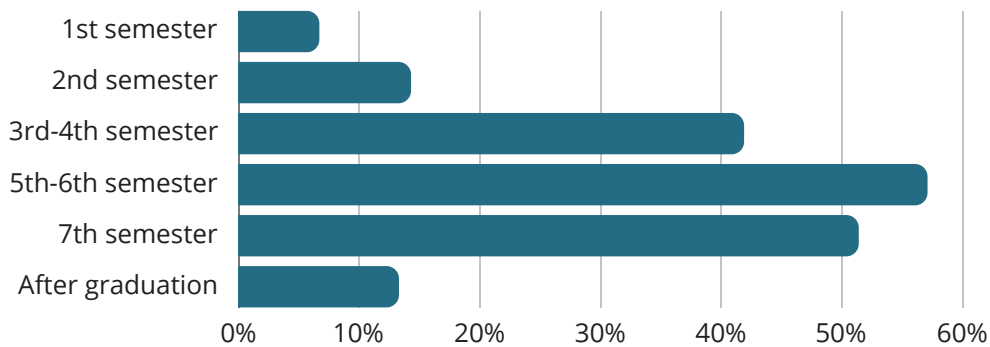
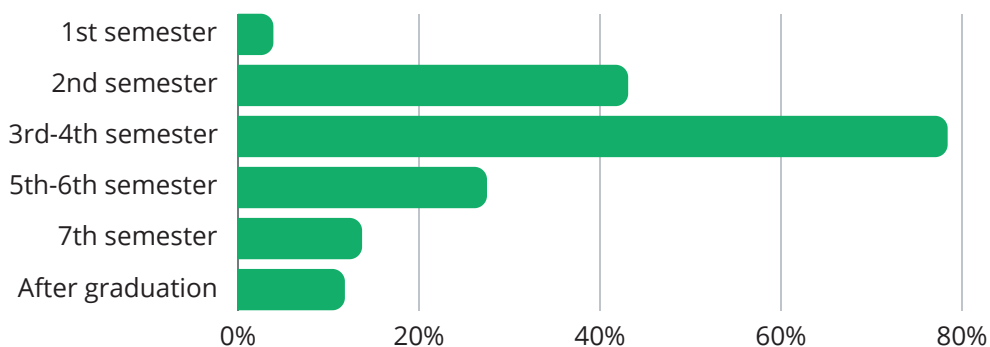


Figure 2. When is it ideal to start your first professional job?



Contrast between when participants who took part in the survey wish to start working or have started to work (blue: those who have work experience, green: those who do not)

In addition, the participants were also asked about what motivates them to start working in a professional environment. A majority of those who graduated in Budapest or its suburbs were not motivated by financial needs but rather by factors such as gaining experience, peer and family pressure, or the desire for discretionary income. Conversely, a significant portion of respondents from rural areas were motivated by the need to raise money for living costs. These differences in motivations are important for designing job ads and recruitment strategies tailored to different regions or demographics. The variation in motivations can be related to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, with urban graduates potentially focusing on higher-level needs, while rural graduates prioritize physiological and safety needs due to their different environments and opportunities.

The third part of the survey delved into the youth preferences and methods for finding an ideal workplace. It included questions about job search methods, information sources for company research, and factors that matter when looking for a job. This section aimed to provide insights into what matters most to job seekers and how companies can better attract and retain talent. From the data collected, it was discovered that the top five sources for job searches among the participants were 1) recommendations from friends (mentioned by 91 percent of participants), 2) specialized student job agencies (74.4 percent), 3) student organizations (68.6 percent), 4) job fairs (59.6 percent), and 5) LinkedIn (53.2 percent).

Table 1. What motivates you to start working?

WHERE DID YOU ATTEND HIGH SCHOOL?	RAISE MONEY FOR LIVING COSTS	REASONS UNRELATED TO LIVING COSTS	TOTAL NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
BUDAPEST OR AGGLOMERATION	9.9%	90.1%	91
COUNTRYSIDE IN HUNGARY	65.6%	34.4%	64

Motivation to start working based on place of study

When asked about the credibility of their source of information regarding the job market, Generation Z values word-of-mouth, with a majority (98 percent) considering a friend or acquaintance working at a company as the most credible content about potential employers. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, are classified as more credible than LinkedIn in their opinion. These results demonstrated that respondents still value personal connections and face-to-face encounters when deciding about their careers while seeking testimonies from more informal platforms in comparison to official online channels (i.e., newsletters).

A participant from the focus group with two years of professional experience and a master’s degree on the way commented: “I always utilize my network when applying to jobs. I trust my friends’ opinion way more than what I can read from a dry job advertisement.” Another participant added “In my experience, if you apply without a recommendation, the recruitment process can take months. I applied twice with a referral and the usual time was cut in half.” Members of the focus group with no professional experience strongly agreed that “company visits are the best way of truly getting to know who you will be working for. You can get a feel of the place, meet your future colleagues, ask directly about the position and if you’re lucky, you can go home with a bunch of freebies.” These findings indicate that companies need to invest in their employer branding strategies and put more emphasis on appearing at jobs fairs, and universities or hosting their own career day. Additionally, if companies invest in employer branding, there is a higher chance that Generation Z will find friends’ posts about the company online, not only face-to-face.

Participants were asked open-ended questions regarding what they search for in a job description, what they frequently miss from them, and what kind of job descriptions are to their liking. Among the responses, a significant majority of 86 percent expressed frustration with the absence of salary information in job descriptions. A focus group participant with one year of experience expressed that “we do not know what our worth is on the market. There are so many variables and I always get anxious when they ask about my payment expectations. I am scared that if I give the wrong answer, they will not hire me, so I always say a lower number than what I would actually like to get.” Other common concerns included not knowing about career advancement opportunities, the availability of work-from-home options, the identity of the supervisor or team members, and information about company culture. Furthermore, many respondents (86.5 percent) expressed a preference for job postings that provide a clear picture of what their work routine will be like, complete with informative details about the company's expectations and goals.

Table 2. What sources are the most credible in terms of job hunting?

	18-21 YEARS OLDS	22-25 YEARS OLDS
OPINION OF A FRIEND WORKING THERE	97.1%	98.9%
COMPANY VISIT OR MEETUP	95.7%	94.3%
VIDEO INTERVIEWS WITH STAFF	71.0%	80.5%
FACEBOOK AND INSTAGRAM POSTS	75.4%	78.2%
COMPANY WEBSITE	62.3%	72.4%
TIKTOK POSTS	75.4%	60.9%
LINKEDIN POSTS	34.8%	72.4%
GLASSDOOR REVIEWS	7.2%	52.9%
COMPANY NEWSLETTER	17.4%	21.8%
<i>TOTAL NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS</i>	69	87

Table 2: Generation Z preferred sources of information when job hunting

The survey further revealed that storytelling videos are also popular among job seekers, with 55 percent of participants expressing a preference for them. Storytelling videos offer a representation of the company's culture and values and are an effective way to bring job descriptions to life. In contrast, traditional formal job descriptions were only favoured by 19.9 percent of respondents, highlighting the need for companies to adopt more creative and engaging approaches to job advertisements. As highlighted by a focus group participant who is actively searching for their first job, "I like it when there is more to a job description than just stating what they want from us. I enjoy seeing the faces of people I will be working with and videos that show around the office."

4. Conclusions

This study employed a combination of online surveys and focus group interviews to gain insights into the job preferences and communicative practices of Generation Z in Hungary. The research results emphasized the significance of a personal touch in job descriptions, highlighting Generation Z's desire to understand a company's culture and environment before applying. Moreover, the group demonstrated a preference for communication channels that enable a personal connection with the company, including friend recommendations, job fairs, and company visits. When it comes to social media platforms, they seek information more on informal places – such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok – than on professional platforms, such as LinkedIn.

The identified temporal variations in workforce entry preferences among Generation Z, based on prior work experience, demonstrate that these younger workers bring new demands to companies and the market on a general level, challenging established structures that prioritize stability and commitment over flexibility and experimentation. Personal inclinations, familial expectations, and academic bonds need to be considered on many levels, including their daily work-life balance but also how organizations communicate with them. For instance, when creating messages that are directed to this public, marketing and communication professionals need to address their needs and tailor the tone according to the youngsters' expectations.

Furthermore, our research underlines the diversity within Generation Z, with job preferences and motivations varying across age subgroups (i.e., bachelor students want to get experience as soon as possible, while those older students consider it necessary to dedicate more time to their university). Therefore, it demonstrates the relevance of applying employer branding strategies to accommodate these differences within the groups, providing personalized experiences for job seekers that match their communication style.

Finally, the participants also highlighted the need for transparent communication about career growth and opportunities, requiring that companies inform salaries and work routines. In this sense, their demands could also result in a change in how HR professionals disclose strategic information in the job description, moving from more general content to very specific and detailed messages, allowing applicants to decide upfront whether it is a position / company they want to work with or not. Therefore, employer branding professionals must take into consideration both communicational and HR characteristics over time to successfully connect with this new generation, attract them to apply for positions, and also retain qualified talent.

Further studies could be dedicated to providing a cross-country comparative analysis within Central and Eastern Europe, thus exploring how Generation Z in the region perceives employer branding. This could clarify if the patterns perceived in Hungary are limited to national characteristics or if they can also be perceived in neighboring countries, which share some similarities in their history and demographics. Hence, organizations need to remain adaptable and responsive to these generational preferences, as the landscape of recruitment and employer branding continues to evolve.

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