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The Future of Work: Adapting Employer Branding for the New Generation

A case study on Randstad's employer branding strategy



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Kaya Ahlers Pedersen
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Supervisor: Peter Kastberg



AALBORG UNIVERSITET

Abstract

In a time where young employees prioritise values such as flexibility, purpose and psychological security over traditional benefits, it is crucial that organisations understand and address these shifts. With a social constructivist approach, this thesis aims to investigate how Generation Z's expectations and demands of the labour market are reflected in Randstad's employer branding strategies.

For the investigation of this topic, two semi-structured interviews have been conducted with a respondent from Generation Z and a respondent from Randstad's HR department, respectively. The purpose of these interviews is to firstly gain a nuanced insight to the generation's thoughts about what is important in a workplace, and which values the Generation Z respondent has in this regard. The Generation Z respondent thereby functions as a representative of the generation, with reservations that the interview subject cannot constitute an exact representation of an entire generation. Secondly, the interview with the Randstad respondent serves the purpose of providing an insight to the strategies that constitute the organisation's employer branding.

In order to process the interview data into useful empirical data, Braun and Clarke's method of thematic coding has been used, which has led to the interviews being divided into five main themes: *Working conditions*, *Management*, *Values and employer branding*, *Generation Z's identity and preferences* and *Technology*. These five themes constitute the frame of the analysis as they have been reviewed one by one with three different theoretical perspectives, as presented below.

The theoretical framework of the thesis consists of three parts. Firstly, the thesis introduces Karl Mannheim's generational theory, which is based on the notion that generations cannot simply be defined based on the year in which the individuals are born, but by the social, cultural and historical events that have occurred in their formative years. This is supplied by Jean Twenge's research, which focuses specifically on Generation Z and what characterises this generation.

Following this, is a presentation of Denise Rousseau's psychological contract theory which combined with generational theory provides an insight to how generational based opinions and values are contributory to the creation of expectations in the labour market, and why this can be crucial to the cooperation between the organisation and the employee.

Finally, Barrow and Mosley's framework on employer branding and employee value proposition – or EVP – is presented to provide a basis for actively situating the findings from generational theory and psychological contract theory within an employer branding context.

Through the analysis and discussion, it has been uncovered that Generation Z highly values flexibility, autonomy, purpose and value alignment. These needs are shaped by amongst others a digital upbringing, economical insecurities and an increased awareness of social and ethical issues. Randstad's employee value proposition *Together We Grow* addresses several of these demands. However, even a strongly communicated message may not always align with the perceived reality from an employee perspective. Reviews from job portals indicate moments of tension between Randstad's communicated brand and the experienced working conditions. This emphasises the importance of understanding employer branding as both an external attraction strategy as well as an internal practice that is to be perceived as authentic.

Overall, the thesis finds that a successful employer brand requires a close connection between strategy and practice and that Generation Z to an increasing extent uses social evidence in their evaluation of their future workplaces. Based on these findings, it is recommended that organisations like Randstad continuously integrates feedback in the development of their employer branding to ensure relevance and authenticity to the future of work.

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1. Introduction

As the labour market undergoes significant change influenced by digitalisation, globalisation and shifting generational dynamics, organisations face new demands and expectations from a new generation of employees. Especially Generation Z, who are defined as born between 1995-2012 (Twenge 2017, 9) are now entering the labour market with characteristic opinions and preferences which differ significantly from previous generations. This generation has grown up in a digital world influenced by financial insecurity, climate crises and social movements, which has contributed to shaping their perception of work as more than just a financial necessity. Instead, the generation demands flexibility, growth, authenticity and value alignment from their workplaces (Twenge 2017; Randstad 2025).

With the complexity of this new generation, many organisations face the challenge of adjusting their communication and working conditions accordingly. Whereas the labour market previously has been characterised by hierarchical structures (Boss 2014), new generations seek inclusive, adaptive and value-based environments (Choughari 2024). The generation not only seeks a paying job, but a workplace where they can realise their values and grow on a professional and personal level. This shift raises the question of the need for new strategies of how organisations can attract, retain and relate to young employees.

Thus, employer branding as a strategic process in which an organisation positions itself has gained renewed importance to have an increasing focus on communicating authenticity, purpose and culture rather than merely transactional benefits such as salary and results. And more importantly, organisations must not only communicate their values, but also be able to live up to them in a way that is tangible and consistent to employees (Backhaus and Tikoo 2004; Barrow and Mosley 2005). Thereby, employer branding is not simply a question of attraction, but also about creating a psychological connection. Based on Rousseau's concept of psychological contracts (Rousseau 1995), employer branding can be viewed as a central mechanism that shapes employees' expectations of the workplace. Especially to a generation who values authenticity, misalignment between communicated promises and experienced practice can lead to decreasing motivation, mistrust and resignations.

Despite the increasing attention to both Generation Z and employer branding in research, it remains a relevant topic of investigation how organisations are able to succeed in connecting insights about generation specific values to tangible branding initiatives in practice. Therefore, it

is relevant to investigate how employer branding strategies targeted at young people are actually perceived as meaningful and authentic not just as a message but as a daily practice. Especially in the HR and recruitment industry, where the relationship with employees is the core of the service, this connection between employer branding and generational understanding is relevant to investigate.

In relation to this, Randstad is a highly relevant case. As the largest HR and recruitment organisation in the world (Randstad, n.d.), Randstad operates in over 38 countries and employs more than 40,000 people globally, while supporting over two million individuals in finding employment each year. The company offers a wide range of staffing, recruitment and talent solutions, and positions itself as a people-centred organisation with a strong emphasis on inclusivity, human connection and long-term career development. In recent years, Randstad has placed increasing strategic focus on employer branding, not only to attract top talent internally, but also to model best practices externally in its client-facing work. With an explicit employer branding strategy centred in the organisation's employee value proposition (Barrow and Mosley 2005, p 125) *Together We Grow*, Randstad communicates a clear focus on inclusion, personal development and shared success. This employee value proposition is designed to reflect both the company's internal values and its promise to prospective employees. The central question remains, whether the strategy aligns with Generation Z's expectations and how the generation perceives the connection between employer brand and organisational reality.

This thesis seeks to investigate how Generation Z's expectation of the labour market is reflected in Randstad's employer branding strategy. Through a combination of generational theory, psychological contract theory and employer branding literature, as well as qualitative interviews and reflective thematic analyses, this thesis contributes with insights to how employer branding strategies are received and interpreted by a generation whose expectations to an increasing extent are changing the labour market.

2. Problem statement

How does Randstad's employer branding strategy reflect and respond to Generation Z's expectations in theory and practice?

2.1. Problem definition

To address this problem statement, the thesis examines how Randstad's employer branding strategy aligns with Generation Z's expectations of the labour market. Based on the premise that Generation Z values flexibility, growth, authenticity, and value alignment, the study investigates whether these preferences are reflected in Randstad's employee value proposition and related branding efforts.

The case study focuses on Randstad due to its global presence and clearly defined employer branding strategy. The investigation draws on qualitative interviews with a Generation Z respondent and a Randstad HR representative, as well as Randstad's Workmonitor from 2025 and branding material. This forms the basis for analysing how employer branding is used to engage a generation that places high demands on transparency and organisational values.

3. Literature review

In order to shed light on the problem statement of this thesis and analyse how Generation Z's expectations of the labour market are reflected in Randstad's employer branding strategy, it is crucial to establish a theoretical and research-based foundation. This literature review seeks to create an overview of existing research on the topic and central terms, which create the framework for the analysis. The chapter will firstly introduce a rationale for the particular research topic of this thesis followed by a review of existing research in the field. Based on this, the chapter will proceed to present a review of the theoretical choices regarding selections and deselections that has led to the theoretical framework of the research.

This includes relevant generational theory, psychological contract theory and employer branding literature including a presentation of employee value proposition (Barrow and Mosley 2005, 125).

3.1. Rationale for the study

As new generations enter the labour market, employees' expectations and values change, and this may challenge organisations to rethink their way of attracting and retaining workforce. Generation Z, who is the most recent generation to enter the labour market, differs significantly from previous generations in the sense that this generation to a larger extent values flexibility, purpose, authenticity and mental health (Twenge 2017). These tendencies create an urgent need to understand how the generation's preferences and expectations can be reflected in organisations' employer branding strategies and employee value proposition.

To understand how these tendencies are manifested in young employees, and how they differ from previous generations, Karl Mannheim's classical generational theory will constitute a theoretical foundation in this research. Mannheim's theory contributes with a sociological frame, where generations are understood as socially constructed units shaped by historical and cultural events in their formative years (Mannheim 1952). This framework is supported by Jean Twenge's research of extensive survey data and psychological insights, which cast light over Generation Z's values, expectations and mental health (Twenge 2017). The two generational theoretical frames create an analytical foundation for understanding how Generation Z's opinions on the labour market have come to be and why these must be addressed strategically in modern employer branding.

Multiple studies show that employer branding has gained a central strategic role in talent management and organisational development (Backhaus and Tikoo 2004; Barrow and Mosley 2005). This is for instance due to an increase in global competition for talent and a workforce that becomes more mobile, critical and value driven. According to Randstad's Workmonitor 2025 (Randstad 2025), both work-life balance and mental health support exceeded pay in importance (Randstad 2025, 12). This indicates a movement away from traditional material benefits in favour of more relational and value-driven employment relationships. By this, it becomes highly relevant to investigate the research topic with a theoretical standpoint in Denise Rousseau's psychological contract theory (Rousseau 1995). Rousseau's work with psychological contracts emphasises how informal expectations are created long before an actual employment. This is often done through branding and first impressions. When employer branding and employee value proposition-communication do not match the experiences that the employee has, it may lead to perceived contract violation which can impact the employee's motivation, loyalty and retention negatively,

thereby supporting the importance that organisations obtain an in depth understanding of the new generation's expectations and demands, and that they succeed in fulfilling them both symbolically and practically.

Despite the growing extent of literature on employer branding, it is still relevant to conduct even more thorough research on how generational-theoretical perspectives can be applied in branding strategies, especially with a focus on Generation Z. Barrow and Mosley highlight employee value proposition as a tool that needs to be authentic, differentiated and targeted. However, there is a significant lack of empirical studies in the literature that investigate how employee value proposition is actually perceived and interpreted by young employees. Furthermore, there is a limited amount of research that integrates employer branding, psychological contracts and generational theory in one combined framework.

3.2. Existing research in employer branding and Generation Z

Several researchers and consultancy firms have over the past years sought to understand how employer branding can be adapted towards Generation Z in the most beneficial way possible, and how this generation differs from previous cohorts. This sub-chapter presents three central contributions that draw a nuanced picture of Generation Z's preferences and how organisations can accommodate these in their branding strategies.

In her article *Are You Ready For Gen Z in the Workplace* (Schroth 2019), Holly Schroth analyses how Generation Z differs significantly from previous generations, and especially in regard to their expectations of the workplace. Amongst others, Schroth highlights that Generation Z is the most achievement-oriented generation, they have more economic well-being and are more racially and ethnically diverse. On the other hand, the generation is also more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety, and for their age they lack experience in the labour market, compared to other generations (Schroth 2019, 5-6). Compared to previous generations, Schroth's research also presents that Generation Z is more driven by career development opportunities, and that they value motivating behaviour from their manager (Schroth 2019, 12). These findings have a large impact on how employers ought to communicate their employee value proposition, not only with a focus on purpose and culture, but also on concrete opportunities for learning, progression and stability. Based on her findings, Schroth continues to offer suggestions on management strategies, which

includes fostering autonomy and a growth mindset, offering workplace coaching and emotional support, and promoting diversity, equity and inclusion. These strategies, she suggests, can increase an organisation's workplace satisfaction, productivity and reduce turnover amongst Generation Z employees (Schroth 2019, 14).

Another relevant contribution to the topic of Generation Z in the labour market is found in Francis and Hoefel's report conducted for the consultancy firm McKinsey (Francis and Hoefel 2018). Francis and Hoefel introduce the term *True Gen* used to characterise Generation Z, and based on the report's quantitative data, they identify four main characteristics to Generation Z. Firstly, they present the generation to be highly value driven in their consumption and choice of jobs. Secondly, they highlight the generation's desire for individualisation and personal adaptation. Thirdly, Generation Z is characterised by having a large focus on dialogue and authenticity, and lastly, the generation has a high digital engagement and competence level (Francis and Hoefel 2018). These dimensions have direct implications for employer branding in the sense that young people expect that their workplace's values align with their own personal values and that branding does not come off as superficial communication but as a real organisational practice.

A more theoretically founded contribution to the understanding of employer branding is offered by Backhaus and Tikoo, who were among the first to conceptualise employer branding in academia. In their article *Conceptualizing and Researching Employer Branding* (Backhaus and Tikoo 2004), they present a model in which employer branding is divided into three phases. The first phase is the development of value propositions, the second phase is external branding targeted at potential candidates and the third phase is internal branding targeted at existing employees (Backhaus and Tikoo 2004, 502-503). According to the model, employee value proposition must be consistent between external communication and internal practice, or the organisation risks undermining its own credibility and provoking negative reactions in employees. Moreover, Backhaus and Tikoo emphasise that employer branding is not only a communication tool, but a strategic HR practice that affects organisational culture, recruitment and retention. This perspective is especially relevant in the encounter with Generation Z, where mismatch between branding and reality quickly can lead to violation of the psychological contracts.

In summary, it becomes clear that Generation Z values authenticity, flexibility, and value-based alignment, and that employer branding ought to reflect these expectations both

communicatively and organisationally. If an organisation fails to do so, it may lead to violation of trust.

At the same time, it becomes clear that employer branding is no longer simply about attracting talent but also to a large extent about retaining it through continuous fulfilment of the psychological contract.

3.3. Theoretical framework

In selecting theory for this thesis, it has been essential not only to include relevant and well-established theoretical perspectives, but also to deliberately exclude theories that, for various reasons, do not align with the research question or the thesis's epistemological foundation. This sub-chapter accounts for the most relevant deselections within the three central theoretical domains, e.g., generational theory, psychological contract theory and employer branding, and the theories that have been chosen instead.

3.3.1. Generational theory

The first theoretical aspect that is central to uncover in regard to this thesis is generational theory, within which several theoretical standpoints are relevant to investigate. One of the leading theories to explain the phenomenon of generations is Strauss and Howe's approach to generational theory, which presents generations through a cyclic mindset (Strauss and Howe 1991). The pair base their approach on fixed 20-year patterns and predictable generational types, which in many ways reflects a positivist perspective. Taking this into consideration, it is assessed that Strauss and Howe's approach is incompatible with the social constructivist standpoint of this research.

Contrary, Karl Mannheim's focus on how historical and societal events shape a generation's collective consciousness during its formative years aligns with the theory of science of this thesis. In his essay *Das Problem der Generationen* (Mannheim 1928), later published in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (Mannheim 1952), Mannheim introduced a sociological understanding of generation that broke with earlier biological and romantic-historical conceptions. Mannheim argues that generations are not only defined by the year in which people are born but are to be understood as social units shaped by historical and cultural experiences in the formative years (Mannheim 1952, 282). Within Mannheim's theory, he presents three central concepts: 'generational location', which refers to the historical and geographical context in which a

generation is born, ‘generational actuality’, which refers to the generation’s active processing and reaction to contemporary events, and ‘generation units’ which refers to sub-groups within a generation who share certain values and interpretations of their shared experiences.

In order to link Mannheim’s theory to a more contemporary context, it is relevant to investigate more recent research on the topic of generations. Here Jean Twenge’s research has been included as a modern supplement to Mannheim, as Twenge’s extensive quantitative data and cultural analyses provide a nuanced picture of Generation Z’s values, identity and behaviour in the labour market. (Twenge 2017). Twenge’s research thus contributes with concrete knowledge on traits that characterise Generation Z and thereby constitute the foundation on which their expectations of the labour market are built. In her book *IGen* (Twenge 2017), Twenge identifies character traits in people born between approximately 1995 and 2012 (Twenge 2017, 9). This includes increased individualism, larger sense of mental vulnerability and strong demands for authenticity and flexibility in the work life. Twenge’s research supports Mannheim’s theory by specifying how historical events such as digitalisation and the financial crisis in 2008 has shaped Generation Z’s world image and preferences to the labour market.

Together, Mannheim and Twenge create a theoretical foundation for understanding how Generation Z’s values are rooted in contemporary cultural and economic conditions, and how these shape their expectations of their work life.

3.3.2. Psychological contract theory

From a psychological contract theory perspective, static models such as classical economic theories of employment have been excluded. These models e.g., Principal-Agent theory frame employment as a purely transactional exchange based on performance and economic incentives (Eisenhardt 1989). However, such an approach overlooks the emotional, relational and value-driven dimensions that are crucial to understanding Generation Z’s expectations and needs. Instead, Denise Rousseau’s theory of psychological contracts has been applied, as this theory allows for a differentiation between transactional and relational contracts and creates room to analyse how expectations are formed through perception, trust and branding rather than simply formal agreements (Rousseau 1995).

While generational theory contributes to an understanding of how expectations are formed in a historical and social perspective, Rousseau’s theory of psychological contracts offers an analytical

perspective on how these expectations are manifested in the relation between the individual and the organisation. Rousseau describes the psychological contract as the individual's subjective perception of mutual commitments in the work relation, and often this is based on informal signals rather than explicit agreements (Rousseau 1995, 34-35). The contract formation can occur already prior to employment, for instance through employer branding, and is shaped by each individual's interpretation of an organisation's values, tone and communication.

Rousseau distinguishes between two main types of contracts: transactional contracts, which are often short term and influenced by economical exchanges, and relational contracts, which are often long term, value-based and include expectations about personal development, loyalty and meaningfulness (Rousseau 1995, 91-92). These contracts exist on a continuum and can be combined depending on the individual's needs and context in which the contract is formed. In relation to Generation Z, it is relevant to investigate how the generation creates and interprets psychological contracts, especially in the light of their priority of autonomy and career-development options (Randstad 2025, 6). Additionally, Rousseau contributes with a typology for responses on contract violation, i.e., voice, exit, neglect and loyalty, which are highly useful in an analytical assessment of how Generation Z potentially will react if their expectations of a workplace is not accommodated (Rousseau 1995, 134).

3.3.3. Employer branding literature

In regard to employer branding and employee value proposition, Barrow and Mosley's strategic and practical approach has been chosen as a theoretical foundation (Barrow and Mosley 2005). Here, more general branding theories such as Aaker (1996) and Keller (2003) have been deselected. These theories revolve around commercial brand management in a traditional sense and are more so focused on consumer relations and companies' market positioning, which makes them less applicable in terms of employer branding. Moreover, Simon Sinek's philosophical approach, e.g., *Start with Why* (Sinek 2009) has been excluded as a primary theory as it lacks the analytical and empirical foundation necessary in a systematic investigation of employer branding strategies.

Barrow and Mosley, on the other hand, build a bridge between classical brand management and HR strategy, and their model focuses directly on employee experiences, organisational values and employer-employee relations, which are central aspects to working with employer branding

targeted at Generation Z. In *The Employer Brand* (Barrow and Mosley 2005), they describe employer branding as the way in which an organisation communicates its identity and its values to current and potential employees. Employer branding differs from consumer branding in the sense that the target group consists of internal and external employees as opposed to consumers. The concept of the employee value proposition is central to Barrow and Mosley's model. The model describes the collective added value that an organisation offers employees both in regard to functional, emotional and higher-order benefits (Barrow and Mosley 2005, 58-59). Thereby, a strong employee value proposition works as a link between employer branding and the psychological contract, as it is through the employee value proposition that an organisation has the option of shaping and fulfilling its employees' expectations. In relation to Generation Z's preferences of authenticity, flexibility and value-based management, employee value proposition becomes a central tool to attract and retain talent in a labour market that is influenced by rapid change (Barrow and Mosley 2005; Randstad 2025).

In summary, the deselections for this thesis have been made in order to ensure theoretical consistency and relevance in relation to both the problem statement and the social constructivist standpoint. Priority has been given to theories that support a contextualised and relational understanding of labour market dynamics, and that enable an in-depth analysis of how Generation Z's expectations are shaped and met in practice.

The three chosen theoretical perspectives, i.e., Mannheim's generational theory, Rousseau's psychological contract theory and Barrow and Mosley's employer branding framework have been chosen due to their ability to collectively support the understanding of how expectations are shaped and negotiated in the encounter between Generation Z and today's organisations. Each theory contributes with a unique analytical point of view, where Mannheim and Twenge provide insight to the historical and cultural conditions that are foundational in the creation of generations. Rousseau offers a psychological perspective on how the generation's values are translated into perceived commitments and expectations, and Barrow and Mosley add a strategic and organisational dimension by connecting these expectations of branding strategies. By deliberately excluding theories that do not align with the social constructivist standpoint of this thesis, it becomes possible to ensure a methodological and theoretical connection.

Through this literature review, it becomes clear that employer branding has a central part in the work of attracting and retaining Generation Z in a labour market influenced by increasing competition and shifting values. Existing research points towards a generation that has specific demands for flexibility, authenticity and value alignment, and that organisations' ability to accommodate these demands through their employer branding and employee value proposition is crucial to their position in the future labour market.

Additionally, the review supports the notion that further research on the connection between Generation Z's expectations and central theories such as generational theory, psychological contract theory and employee value proposition model is still relevant. To create a solid analytical framework for the thesis, the following chapter presents and elaborates on these three theories, and in combination they will constitute the foundation for the analysis of how Generation Z's expectations are reflected in Randstad's employer branding strategy.

4. Theoretical frameworks

As the labour market develops, there are constantly new demands for companies' ability to attract and retain talent. Generation Z, who is the newest generation on the labour market, has shown to have other preferences and expectations of their employers than the generations who came before them. In order to understand these differences and their significance for employer branding, it is necessary to incorporate a range of theoretical perspectives.

This section will elaborate on three central theories which together set the frame for the analysis of Randstad's employer branding strategy in relation to Generation Z. Firstly, the section will introduce generational theory with a basis in Mannheim and Twenge's works. This is to elaborate on the factors that form and define a generation and what characterises Generation Z on the labour market. In addition to generational theory, psychological contract theory will be used to highlight the implicit expectations that Generation Z has to their employers. Finally, the section will present Barrow and Mosley's framework on employer branding, including the employee value proposition model which is a central tool used by companies in employer branding to shape attractive work environments and values to target specific talent groups.

The combination of these three theoretical perspectives provides a foundation to analyse how Randstad works with employer branding in a strategic way to accommodate and attract Generation Z talent based on their expectations of the labour market.

4.1. Mannheim's generational theory

The concept of generations is central to understanding how social and historical conditions can shape the collective identity and values of a group. One of the most influential theorists within generational research is Karl Mannheim. The Hungarian-German sociologist graduated from University of Budapest in 1919 (Andersen 2025), where he studied philosophy, literature and sociology, and especially his interest in sociology has had a large impact on his later works. In 1928, Mannheim published his Essay *Das Problem der Generation, or The Problem of Generations* in which he first introduces his theory of generation. The essay was later published in a collection of works and republished in 1952 (Mannheim 1952).

In his essay, Mannheim critiques previous approaches to define generations and how they are formed. He states that many other academics, e.g., Comte, Cournot, J. Dromel and others, are influenced by the “positivist wave” encompassed in Europe at the time the theories were originally developed, and that these academics are all seeking to define a mathematical pattern to generations (Mannheim 1952, 278). Mannheim describes that previously and with a positivist mindset, generations could be determined based on life cycles and the lifespan of humans, meaning that generations can be described as a cycle where a new generation is born to replace the older generations. Typically, the generational cycle, based on this approach, was assessed to be 30 years. (Mannheim 1952, 278).

Additional to the positivistic approach, Mannheim also has reservations towards the romantic-historical approach to generations (Mannheim 1952, 280). The romantic-historical approach can be described as based on internal factors, and generations are viewed more on the basis of emotions and experiences rather than the positivistic way of measuring generations simply in time. For instance, the German philosopher Dilthey states that time is perceived differently by different people based on their life situations, and that generations do not simply appear one after the other to replace one another, but that they coexist and affect each other (Mannheim 1952, 282). Mannheim's critique of the positivistic and romantic-historical approaches, respectively, states that the two are too radical in their perception of generations, and their disregarding of social processes and factors to have an influence on generations.

As an alternative to these radical approaches, Mannheim introduces his own theory on how generations are to be viewed in a sociological context. In this theory, he introduces the idea that

generations are not only defined by biological age, but by common experiences of societal and historical events. According to Mannheim, a generation consists of individuals who live at the same time and who are exposed to the same socio-political and cultural changes in a formative period of their lives, which is typically during adolescence (Mannheim 1952, 282). These changes and events, he explains, are attributional to creating a common social cohort that shares an understanding of the situation and time they live in.

In the essay, Mannheim introduces three key concepts to understand and define generations as presented below.

4.1.1. Generational location

The term *generational location* refers to the objective fact that people born within a given historical period and geographical context share similar conditions (Mannheim 1952, 303). This, according to Mannheim, is a prerequisite that a generation can develop a common perception of the world. However, it is not simply enough to be born in the same time period, as the decisive factor is whether the individuals within that time period experience meaningful historical and social events in their formative years.

For instance, people born during World War II are arguably going to have a completely different perception of society and the world of today as opposed to people born in the 70's because their frame of reference is based on very different societal and historic events.

In relation to understanding Generation Z and their unique expectations of the labour market, the concept of generational location is highly relevant to investigate. This is in the sense that during the time that Generation Z has been alive, the world has faced several societal events that have arguably had a large impact on the generation's perception of the world, and thus their attitude toward work. For instance, the Covid-19 pandemic has had a large influence on the generation's expectations of hybrid work and work-life balance (MacKenzie 2021).

4.1.2. Generational actuality

The concept of *generational actuality* refers to the actual reality in which a generation experiences its own time. The concept focuses on the concrete historical and social circumstances that affect a generation, and how these conditions are processed by the people within the generation. Mannheim

differentiates between the potential meaning of a generation and its actual reality. This means that a generation may have certain historical opportunities and conditions, but that it is not until these opportunities are perceived and interacted with that the generation becomes part of the collective reality. The concept emphasises how actual circumstances such as wars, financial crises and technological development set the frame for the way a generation perceives itself and how it acts in the world. Thus, a generation may have a certain potential reality based on the historical and societal events it is exposed to. However, how the generation reacts to these events and which ideologies and values it develops on this basis highly depends on the concrete actions and experiences that occur. (Mannheim 1952, 306).

An example of this is the digitalisation, during which Millennials for the most part was present for the rise of the digitalisation, and therefore had to adapt to it, as it evolved, whereas Generation Z was born into a completely digital world. This arguably has a large impact as to how the two generations perceive the world in a digital age, and how this has affected their approach to setting expectations and demands to their workplace (Vantage Circle n.d.).

4.1.3. Generation unit

Another term that Mannheim introduces as a key concept in his theory is *generation unit* (Mannheim 1952, 304). This term refers to the phenomenon of a group of individuals who share a common generational location and who, through their interactions, develop a common set of values, ideas and perspectives. A generation unit is thus a collective unit that does not only consist of individuals within the same age range, but also people who have shared the same historical and cultural events.

Mannheim emphasises that a generation does not merely exist as a passive collection of individuals but as an active community that engages in social and political movements, develops specific cultural traits, and shapes societal development. The generation as a unit emerges not only based on a shared birth period but also through shared experiences and a common foundation of understanding. The concept also emphasises that even within a generation, there can be different groups with divergent values and interpretations of the common experiences. This means that not everyone in a generation necessarily develops the same opinions, but that they have a common standpoint (Mannheim 1952, 304).

In practice, this can mean that some people within a generation share values that are particularly characteristic of that generation, while others align with different, but still generationally typical, values. For example, many members of Generation Z are particularly focused on climate activism (BillionBricks, n.d.) or advocating body positivity. While these traits are not unique to Generation Z, they are more prominent in this generation compared to earlier ones (Moran, n.d.).

Together, the three concepts within Mannheim's generational theory constitute a tool to understand how societal, cultural and historical factors interact to shape generations. Applying the concepts in an investigation of generations can thus provide an insight to how, and under which circumstances, a generation appears, what binds the individuals of the generation together and how they are affected by their historical context.

4.2. The Characteristics of Generation Z

While Mannheim's theory provides a foundation for a sociological perspective on generations, modern research has further refined the understanding of specific generational traits. One of the most prominent scholars in this field is American psychologist Jean M. Twenge, whose research is specifically focused on Millennials and Generation Z, and how the two generations differ from one another.

Where Mannheim's theory revolves around the sociological formation of generations in general, Twenge's work dives deeper into the traits and characteristics of Generation Z. In her book *iGen* from 2017 (Twenge 2017), Twenge presents an extensive image of Generation Z. Here, she defines the generation as people born from 1995-2012 (Twenge 2012, 9), and the reason for this definition is based on a multiple of factors. Firstly, she points out the timespan in which generations prior to Generation Z were born, and here, she criticises the long span in which Millennials were defined, i.e., 1980-1999. According to Twenge, this time period is four years longer than the generation before, i.e., Generation X, which were defined as being born between 1965-1979 (Twenge 2017, 8-9). This in itself is not necessarily decisive to whether an individual belongs to one generation or the other, and especially in relation to Mannheim's theory that generations cannot merely be defined by the year in which people are born, but it is nevertheless a convenient reference point. However, Twenge also argues that the technological development in this time period is an important factor to take into account when defining generations: by limiting

the time period in which Generation Z is born, it follows the year in which the internet was invented, which further fits well with the notion of Generation Z being digital natives as opposed to their predecessors (Twenge 2017, 8-9). This corresponds well to Mannheim's definition of generations sharing common societal and historical experiences and supports Twenge's decision to separate the generations at this mark.

In her research, Twenge describes that one of the most significant differences between Generation Z and previous generations is the new generation's *slow life strategy* (Twenge 2017, 23), which refers to the phenomenon of the generation postponing common milestones such as acquiring a driver's license, obtaining a part time job, moving away from home, etc. This phenomenon has its basis in a combination of cultural changes. For instance, there has been a decrease in the number of children in the average American family: in 1965 the average number of children per family was 2.44, whereas in 2023, the average number was 1.94 (Statista n.d.). This arguably also means that parents today are able to attend more to each child (Twenge 2017, 36), which further feeds into the increasing tendency of individualism. Twenge, additionally argues that this delayed transition into adulthood implicates the labour market significantly. In her research, she presents that since 1980, the number of teens with summer jobs decreased from 70% to 43% in 2010 (Twenge 2017, 28), which also means that individuals from Generation Z typically enter the labour market with considerably less experience than their predecessors.

This characteristic of Generation Z is relevant for an organisation to consider, as the generation's individualistic tendencies highly affect the demand for flexibility and autonomy in their work. Moreover, their late entry into the labour market and limited experience should also be considered, as these factors may influence their demand for thorough onboarding, transparency, and support.

In her research, Twenge emphasises mental health as an important factor to understanding Generation Z. In recent years, there has been a rise in psychological challenges in young people, and according to Twenge, this may very well be related to the emergence of smartphones and social media (Twenge 2017, 80). A plausible explanation for this, Twenge suggests, is that more screen time leads to less personal interaction in real life, negatively affecting young people's relations, which can ultimately lead to unhappiness and depression (Twenge 2017, 85). This decrease in mental health in Generation Z can have direct consequences for organisations and employers, as young people are more inclined to enter the labour market with high demands for

emotional support, security and an overall understanding of the individual. This also creates a responsibility for employers to incorporate transparent initiatives that support mental health.

In relation to mental health as a characteristic, this arguably also has an effect on Generation Z's motivation factors in their jobs, which to a large extent is to earn money. This motivation in a job may not be surprising in itself. The underlying motivators in this regard, however, is what differentiates Generation Z from other generations, as the financial aspect of a job is not necessarily with the intention to become rich, but rather to not have to worry about the economy in their everyday life (Twenge 2017, 136). This is in direct correlation to Generation Z's focus on work-life balance, where young people are extremely conscious about their opinion that *"work should not crowd out the rest of life."* (Twenge 2017, 137).

In addition to financial security, it also becomes clear through Twenge's research that Generation Z places importance on their workplace's ability to reflect their personal values. According to Twenge, Generation Z shows significantly larger acceptance towards minorities compared to previous generations, and this is especially in regard to the LGBT+ community, ethnicity and gender identities. The generation has come to expect equality and inclusivity in regard to these demographics (Twenge 2017, 170). This is highly relevant to consider in an employer context as lack of diversity and inclusivity may arguably lead to disappointment in young employees.

Combining Mannheim and Twenge's theoretical standpoints provides a clear understanding of how generations are shaped based on their contemporary context, and how they form distinctive traits, values and expectations. Where Mannheim offers a sociological frame for understanding how historical and cultural events create common experiences and identity, Twenge's empirical work provides an insight to the specific characteristics of Generation Z, specifically. In other words, Mannheim's generational theory offers insights to how a generation differs from others, whereas Twenge's research offers insight to why Generation Z, specifically, differs from others. Placing Generation Z's characteristics in an organisational context, it is inevitable that the generation will create implicit expectations of the workplace.

4.3. Psychological contract theory

In order to understand how Generation Z's values and expectations are translated into actual perceptions of their employers, it is highly relevant to investigate the informal relation between the employee and organisation. The following sub-chapter introduces the concept of psychological contract theory to create a theoretical frame for the investigation of implicit expectations that are formed in the meeting between Generation Z and their employers.

The psychological contract theory was first introduced by Chris Argyris in the 1960's, and later the theory was further developed by the American psychologist Denise Rousseau, who implemented a modern, cognitive approach to the theory. Rousseau describes that "*the psychological contract is individual beliefs, shaped by the organization, regarding terms of an exchange agreement between individuals and their organization*" (Rousseau 1995, 9).

According to Rousseau, the creation of the psychological contract often occurs based on subjective interpretations of information and signals which an individual receives through their contact with an organisation. Rousseau additionally describes how people already prior to employment begin to form images and expectations of what an organisation has to offer as well as the commitments related to a potential employment. This interpretation of messages and expectations happens based on many factors from job advertisement to organisational reputation and branding. Therefore, employer branding has a crucial part in the creation of the psychological contract, in the sense that an organisation communicates specific values and workplace cultures to the public, and based on this, the receiver will arguably form an expectation of what it means to work for that specific organisation (Rousseau 1995, 34-35). The psychological contract is created on the basis of the individual parties' cognitive processing of messages, and in this sense, the contract is not only reliant on the sender's intention, but also on the receiver's perception. In relation to employer branding, this means that an organisation risks creating expectations beyond what is actually explicitly promised, due to the fact that the receiver may draw on elements such as the tone and style of the message and the values that are being communicated, ultimately resulting in a different perception than what was initially intended (Rousseau 1995, 35).

In relation to Generation Z, this is highly relevant to be aware of, since the generation as a group is characterized by having strong values in regard to e.g., flexibility, social responsibilities, authenticity, etc. This is highly important for an organisation like Randstad to consider, when

branding itself with focus on elements such as diversity, sustainability or work-life balance, as the young individuals within the generation may interpret this as implicit promises, and thereby experience it as part of their expectations of the employment.

Furthermore, Rousseau argues that individuals are often not aware that they have created a psychological contract before it is either fulfilled or violated (Rousseau 1995, 30). Based on this, it is crucial that organisations are aware of how their employer branding strategies contribute to the making of the psychological contract, in order to participate in shaping the psychological relationship between employer and employee even before employment.

According to Rousseau, the development of psychological contracts over time is closely linked to structural changes in the labour market, transformations in organisational design, and evolving employee values and needs. Whereas previous generations such as Baby Boomers, who are born between 1946-1964 (USC Libraries 2025), and Generation X had employments that were characterised by long term relations, stability and mutual loyalty, today's employments often show more signs of being short term and individualised (Rousseau 1995, p 95). In her research, Rousseau points out more factors that have changed the character of psychological contracts, amongst others technological changes, change in organisational structures and the increasing demand for mobility and individualised needs (Rousseau 1995, 93).

Additionally, Rousseau also distinguishes between two types of psychological contracts: the transactional contract and the relational contract (Rousseau 1995, 91), and she describes the two as two ends of a *contractual continuum*. The transactional psychological contract represents one of the foundational forms of contracts, and is characterised by low emotional investment, strong focus on financial or materialistic exchange and short-term expectations. Specifically, Rousseau describes a list of typical terms that are included in the transactional contract. Firstly, the contracts include specific economic conditions as a primary incentive, meaning that factors such as salary, bonuses and other monetary incentives are key motivators to the employee, and thus constitutes a steering tool for the employer. Secondly, the list includes limited personal involvement, followed by closed-ended time frames such as seasonal employment. Next on the list is commitments limited to well-specified conditions, as well as little flexibility, the use of existing skills that require no development, and lastly, unambiguous terms readily understood by outsiders (Rousseau 1995, 91). Opposite to the transactional end of the continuum is the relational contracts which to a larger extent are focused on the relationship between employee and employer.

Similar to transactional psychological contracts, relational contracts also have a set of terms that are typical. This list describes factors such as emotional involvement with interest in each other's life, personal support, etc. Furthermore, the terms include a focus on whole-person relations, meaning that growth and development is supported in the psychological contracts. In regard to the time frame of the contractual terms, this is also highly likely to be more open-ended with no set expiration. The relational contract also includes terms of being dynamic and subject to change during the life of the contract, as well as pervasive conditions, meaning that the contract is not tightly defined and precise in its expectations of elements such as work tasks and compensation for specific tasks. Contrary, the relational contract is defined by expectations of support from one's leader, the opportunity for both personal and professional growth, and being perceived as an entire person as opposed to a resource. Lastly, Rousseau's list of terms includes to be subjective and implicitly understood (Rousseau 1995, 92). It is important to note, however, that psychological contracts are not necessarily entirely relational or transactional, but may be a mixture of both, including terms from both lists, hence the concept of the continuum. In relation to this, it is highly important that organisations are capable of differentiating between different types of contracts and adjusting these to the type of employee and position. With this established, Rousseau describes how it becomes possible for employees to connect their own personal values and identity to their work, thus making the contract a symbol of existential and moral community with the organisation (Rousseau 1995, 95).

But what happens if the psychological contract is violated? Rousseau describes a violation of the psychological contract as when the *“perception of a discrepancy between a relied-upon outcome [...] and the actual outcome occurs.”* (Rousseau 1995, 118). This is once again a quite subjective experience, as a violation of contract is dependent on the employee's perception and interpretation of the situation, and not on the intention of the employer. Therefore, Rousseau categorises the degrees of violation into three forms. Firstly, she presents the inadvertent violation, which occurs when the employer or employee violates an expectation without being aware of it, for instance due to misunderstandings in communication. The second form that Rousseau presents is disruption to the contract which refers to the occasion that circumstances will make it impossible for either one or both parties to fulfil their end of the contract, even when they are willing to do so. An example of this is if an employee fails to meet on time due to a car accident. The last form is breach of contract, which happens when one party refuses to fulfil the contract even when they

are capable. Once again, the subjectivity is important to be aware of, when it comes to violation of the psychological contract, as the terms of the contract are dependent on the beholder, meaning that the violation will also be (Rousseau 1995, 112). Violation of the psychological contract will naturally cause certain consequences of mistrust, anger and attrition, and while this of course is not desired outcomes for any party in most cases, violation is almost inevitable, however not necessarily fatal to the psychological contract; it highly depends on the response to violation. Rousseau presents a table of response types ranging from active to passive, and constructive to destructive:

	Constructive	Destructive
Active	Voice	Neglect/Destruction
Passive	Loyalty/Silence	Exit

(Rousseau 1995, 134).

If either party experiences a contract violation, they can choose the response of *voice*, by expressing their dissatisfaction, suggest implementations or changes and other types of feedback. This response is categorised as an active and constructive approach, as it allows for both parties to take accountability of their actions and gives the opportunity to rebuild the parts of the contract that have been violated. Continuing in the active response patterns, there is the response of *neglect*, which opposite to voice is positioned as destructive. With this type of response, the employee may disengage by either doing less, behaving more passively, etc. without necessarily leaving the job – this response is also commonly known as *quiet quitting* (Pendell 2023).

A more passive-constructive response type is *loyalty*, where an employee chooses to stay in the organisation in the hope that things may improve. This may be due to a strong connection to colleagues or organisational goals and values which resonates in the employee. If improvements, however, do not occur, it may arguably result in increasing dissatisfaction. And finally, a passive-destructive response type is *exiting* the organisation, which is typically a response to a serious violation of the psychological contract, e.g., if an employee feels that the employer or organisation fails to live up to certain values which are important to the employee.

In relation to the research question, it is highly relevant to consider that the response to a contractual violation is not only dependent on the degree of the violation and the reaction of the organisation, but also on the generation that the employee belongs to. According to Mannheim's theory a generation is shaped by common societal experiences, which arguably contribute to their shaping of expectations and tolerance of deviance. In relation to Rousseau's notion that psychological contracts to a large extent are formed through communication and signals, it becomes clear that an organisation has an opportunity to contribute to the shaping of contracts by having insight to these elements that are characteristic to certain generations and adapting its communication and employer brand accordingly. By doing so, an organisation is not only able to influence the psychological contracts that are being created in the meeting with employees, but also how these are handled in a crisis situation where violation of contracts is likely to happen. This makes employer branding a highly strategic tool in not only recruitment of new employees, but also in retaining employees and building trust.

4.4. Employer Branding

In order to understand how psychological contracts are formed and influenced in an organisational context, it is necessary to consider the employer's role in creating and shaping expectations in their employees. Whereas the psychological contract focuses on the employee's perception and expectations of the work relationship, employee value proposition is a term that focuses on how an organisation actively shapes these expectations through its collective value proposition. Thus, employee value proposition functions as a strategic standpoint to the psychological contract in the sense that it frames what employees perceive as the organisation's offer of values, including a potential foundation of trust, motivation or contrary: a contract violation.

As the competition for talent increases, employer branding is gaining an increasingly larger impact on organisations. Ambler and Barrow describe employer branding as "*the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the employing company.*" (1996, quoted in Barrow and Mosley 2005, preface), emphasising the responsibility that lies on the organisation's brand towards its employees in regard to both material and immaterial elements. Changes in employees' values and aspirations have further strengthened the need for a professional approach to employer branding. Barrow and Mosley describe how

employees to an increasing extent not only value financial rewards but also meaning, identity and personal development (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 8-17).

Additionally, Barrow and Mosley describe how organisations are facing a significant people management challenge to recruit and retain employees, as this calls for a more conscious handling of the workplace's reputation and employee experience than ever before (Barrow and Mosley 2005, 36). In order to accommodate this, organisations must actively work to define, develop and define a clear employee value proposition. According to Barrow and Mosley, employee value proposition is a central aspect to employer branding, as this constitutes the promise that an organisation gives its employees about what they can expect as part of their employment (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 125), thereby constituting the foundation of employer branding, as it is through the employee value proposition that an organisation has the opportunity to communicate what makes the particular organisation unique as a workplace.

In order to understand how employer branding works practically, it is important to begin with the foundational principles to brand management, which Barrow and Mosley apply to the work with employees and organisations' identity. As opposed to traditional branding which focuses on creating differentiation and loyalty towards customers, employer branding uses more or less the same tools and principles but targeted towards existing and potential employees. The idea of employer branding is to build engagement and attraction in employees, and this involves a deliberate strategy to formulate and communicate an organisation's distinctiveness as a workplace, which is where an employee value proposition has a central role. An employee value proposition thus constitutes a way for an organisation to communicate the benefits of working for that specific organisation, both in regard to tangible services and symbolic and emotional benefits. It is important to note that a strong employer brand cannot be based on salary and benefits alone but must be based on a comprehensive experience and perception of the organisation as a workplace. In regard to this, Barrow and Mosley point out two main components to employer branding, which can help strengthen an organisation's employee value proposition.

The first component, according to Barrow and Mosley, is *functional benefits* (Barrow and Mosley 2005, 58). This component refers to the practical aspects of the work such as accessible resources to do one's job and safe working environment as well as financial aspects. This means that salary, pension, bonuses and other employee benefits are integrated in the functional benefits of an employee value proposition. Often, these factors are seen as entry-level qualifiers, meaning

that the presence of these benefits are non-negotiable for an organisation to be considered attractive in the labour market.

While the functional aspects may often be taken for granted and seen as a given, they are very important to the overall perception of how a workplace takes accountability for its employees. This is in the sense that functional benefits may contribute to an employee's experience of ability to perform, develop and succeed in their role.

The second component is *emotional benefits* (Barrow and Mosley 2005, 58), which refers to the immaterial and emotionally anchored aspects of the work. These are factors that may affect the well-being of an employee, their identity and their engagement and commitment to their work. More specifically, emotional benefits may include the feeling of purpose and goals, meaning the experience that one's work contributes to a bigger purpose. This may both be on a personal, organisational or societal level. Another emotional benefit is the feeling of alignment between an employee's own values and the organisation's visions and mission, as this can foster a feeling of identification with the organisation's values and culture.

Additional emotional benefits may include emotional security and trust to express one's ideas and opinions comfortably, the feeling of being recognised and that one's work matters, and finally, feeling proud of and connected to one's workplace.

In addition to the two main components of functional and emotional benefits, Barrow and Mosley also introduce the term *higher-order benefits* (Barrow and Mosley 2005, 59), which refers to the deeper and more value-based dimensions that an organisation offers its employees. The two authors explain how higher-order benefits are anchored in an organisation's values and vision - in other words: its organisational DNA (Barrow and Mosley 2005, 60). In this regard, higher-order benefits share similarities with emotional benefits in the sense that the two components both refer to psychological aspects such as identification and a sense of belonging. However, there are important distinctions between the two, as emotional benefits relate primarily to the individual's experience of day-to-day well-being and emotional connection within the immediate work environment – such as feeling recognised, safe and appreciated. In contrast, higher-order benefits refer to a deeper, values-based alignment between the individual and the organisation's broader mission, culture and identity. In other words, emotional benefits reflect how the employee feels in their role and team, whereas higher-order benefits reflect whether the employee identifies with what the organisation stands for at a fundamental level.

While employee value proposition is often connected to external recruitment communication and employer branding initiatives, Barrow and Mosley emphasise the importance of a strong employee value proposition as an integrated part of an organisation's overall HR strategy. This is in the sense that employee value proposition is not only a set of promises to potential employees, but rather a proposition to be supported by management and organisational culture (Barrow and Mosley 2005, 126).

This means that employer branding is to be seen as a practice and a strategy that works actively to create alignment between the communicated brand and the reality within the organisation, and if the employee value proposition does not correspond to the employees' actual experiences it may lead to disappointment, mistrust and a violation of the psychological contract.

Considering the demographic development of the labour market, it is especially relevant to connect employee value proposition to the expectations and values that characterise Generation Z. In relation to Twenge's research of Generation Z's shift in values and expectations of their employers, a strong and targeted employee value proposition is essential in the attraction, engagement and retention of the newest generation in the labour market.

4.5. Application of theories.

The three complementary perspectives that have been elaborated throughout the chapter all constitute the analytical foundation for this research, which will be summarised in this sub-chapter.

Mannheim's generational theory will provide a foundation to account for the social, cultural and historical events and contexts that have contributed to the shaping of Generation Z. The theory suggests that factors such as location and actuality have a large impact on the shaping of generations and the possible units found within generations.

The overall sociological framework set by Mannheim's theory is supported by Twenge's empirically based research in Generation Z specifically. This research provides a deeper insight to aspects such as mental health, financial insecurity and value-based expectations, and how this contributes to Generation Z's differentiation from previous generations. Combining Mannheim's generational theory with Twenge's empirical research offers a framework for understanding not only what defines Generation Z, but also how these generational traits have emerged through shared historical and social experiences, and how they influence the generation's approach to the

labour market. In relation to this, Rousseau's theory of psychological contracts is applied to highlight the implicit expectations that Generation Z are likely to have of their employers. Especially in the encounter between Generation Z and organisations it becomes clear that values, communication and perceived promises have a crucial part in an employee's perception of trust and motivation, or contract violation. Finally, Barrow and Mosley's definition and introduction to employer branding and employee value proposition is applied as a strategic frame in which an organisation is able to formulate and communicate its contemporary value proposition to existing and potential employees. The functional, emotional and higher-order benefits clarify how employer branding can target specific generational needs and preferences.

By combining these three theoretical perspectives, it becomes possible to investigate how Randstad works strategically with employer branding in relation to Generation Z's values and expectations of the labour market.

5. Methodology

This section will elaborate on the methodological framework of the study. This will include a presentation of theory of science, detailing of the research design, data collection methods and analytical approach. The purpose of the study is to investigate how Randstad's employer branding strategies align with the expectations and values of Generation Z. In order to achieve this, a qualitative research approach has been used. This allows for an in-depth understanding of individual perceptions and experiences.

The study is based on semi-structured interviews with an interview subject from Generation Z and an employer branding professional from Randstad to gain insights into generational expectations and organizational strategies. This method allows for a flexible approach to the subject while still making it possible to ensure comparability across interviews. In addition to this, the interviews will be analysed using a thematic approach to identify patterns and themes in the data.

By integrating Mannheim's generation theory with Twenge's research on generational psychology, as well as the concepts of psychological contract theory and the employee value proposition model, the study aims to bridge theoretical insights with empirical findings.

The following sections will elaborate on the theory of science, data collection process, and analytical approach, ensuring transparency and rigour in the study's methodology.

5.1. Theory of science

Before engaging in the methods used for data collection and analytical approaches, it is highly relevant to elaborate on the theory of science that makes out the general approach for this thesis, which is a social constructivist approach (Andersen et al. 2012, 22).

Social constructivism as a theory of science states that the world does not exist objectively and independently from human perception, but is a construction based on social interactions, cultural practices and discourses. This, in other words, means that how the world is perceived highly depends on the individual person, the context in which that person finds themselves, and that this may differ immensely.

As a scientific paradigm, social constructivism is founded on particular ontological and epistemological positions, which shape its understanding of reality and how knowledge is constructed. In social constructivism, ontology is to be viewed in a relativistic sense meaning that reality is not perceived as an objective and independent size, but as something created through social interactions. The approach does state that there are certain elements that can be considered objective, and that the subject who perceives it does not affect what is being perceived (Andersen et al. 2012, 22). By this logic, multiple people will be able to look at certain concepts of the world and perceive them more or less the same. An example of this is money. Money and the value it holds is a social construct in the sense that the piece of paper or the digital numbers on a bank account in itself is not more valuable than other paper or numbers, but because society collectively has given it a function and a value, the concept has become recognised as a measure for trading, and therefore, whoever sees a dollar bill will for the most part recognise it and its value in an economical context, making money a relativistic objectivity.

On the other hand, epistemology states that the world exists solely based on the perception of the subjects within it and the social societies in which the subjects find themselves (Andersen et al. 2012, 23). From a social constructivist epistemological standpoint, scientific knowledge is not seen as something that can be definitively verified or falsified, but rather as socially constructed and context dependent. Hypotheses can, of course, be supported by many observations and attempts to prove it wrong, but no matter how many attempts of dismissals, a hypothesis withstands, epistemology states that there is always a risk that new investigations will come along to falsify it.

For this specific thesis, my ontological standpoint leads me to understand that Generation Z is not simply an objective category of people based on age, but more so a socially constructed unit shaped by cultural and societal factors. In relation to this, employer branding is not to be seen as a defined shape and size, but as a dynamic practice where companies and employers create the meaning of the values that they have to offer.

In other words, there is not one universal truth as to what defines Generation Z and their work values, as well as there is not one truth to define employer branding strategies as successful or unsuccessful, as it all depends on the historic and societal context in which it is placed.

Epistemologically, I acknowledge that the knowledge and understanding that I obtain about Generation Z as well as employer branding strategies from the collected data will not make me able to determine a definite conclusion to either. It is, however, possible for me to interpret the data and build on my hypothesis and thereby contributing to a more nuanced picture on the generation in a societal setting and a labour market setting.

5.2. Research design

This thesis is based on an inductive qualitative research approach with a social constructivist standpoint. The thesis has an explorative approach with the intent of obtaining a deep understanding of the factors that influence Generation Z's perception and preferences to the labour market. This is in order to be able to review Randstad's employer branding strategies in regard to Generation Z's preferences and provide possible suggestions for adaptations and adjustments. The qualitative approach is especially suitable for this study, as the thesis seeks to investigate subjective opinions and experiences as opposed to measuring quantitative phenomena. This is also supported by the social constructivist epistemology of the thesis, where knowledge is perceived as a social construction through discourse and interaction.

The thesis can be categorised as a single case study, in which one interview subject from Generation Z has been interviewed. Although based on one single participant, this case is considered to be illustrative of broader generational and societal patterns and is therefore treated as a strategically selected representative case.

Additionally, an interview has been conducted with a representative from Randstad. This interview serves as a supportive and contextualising function to offer insights into the employer branding

strategy and thereby contributing to a more nuanced interpretation of how this strategy aligns with or differs from the expectations of Generation Z.

5.3. Methods

This section of the methodology chapter will elaborate on the methods that have been used throughout the research. The sub-chapter presents both the used data collection methods as well as the analytical approach that constitute the foundation of the analysis of the collected data. The purpose of the method chapter is to ensure transparency about the investigation and its design. The chosen methods have been selected to ensure alignment between research questions, theoretical framework and empirical data.

5.3.1. Method review

This chapter will elaborate on the methodical choices that constitute the foundation of this thesis, as well as account for the selections and deselections made throughout the process. This is in order to provide a transparent understanding of how the investigation has been designed and why the methods that have been used have proven to be the best fit for answering the problem statement.

As this thesis takes its standpoint in a social constructivist approach, it is crucial to use methods that allow it to capture the subjective understandings and interpretations of employer branding amongst Generation Z. Here, a qualitative approach has been chosen, as this approach provides the opportunity to explore how young employers create opinions about the labour market, their expectations and their values in relation to employer branding.

An alternative to a qualitative approach is a quantitative approach, e.g., by conducting a questionnaire to uncover tendencies within a larger population. However, this approach might limit the opportunity to investigate the nuances and underlying discourses in the experiences that Generation Z has to the labour market, which is a central aspect to the very subject of this thesis, making the qualitative research methods most beneficial to use in this thesis.

Within qualitative research methods, there are multiple different approaches to data collection such as case studies, observations and interviews.

As regards interview as a data collection method, this method also carries multiple different approaches that are each beneficial in their own way. For this particular thesis, a semi-structured approach proved to be the most beneficial fit for the desired outcome.

In order to capture a deep insight to Generation Z's perspectives to the labour market, semi-structured interviews are a beneficial tool to use, as the interview method balances a structured approach that ensures comparability of different interviews in regard to themes as well as still allowing to deviate from questions. This flexibility allows the option of diving deep into specific questions and elaborating on themes that may occur during the interview.

In order to analyse the collected data, there are multiple different approaches that are each beneficial in their own way, but for this particular research, I have chosen thematic analysis rather than, for example, discursive analysis. Although discursive analysis aligns well with my social constructivist approach by focusing on how language shapes reality, it requires a deeper engagement with linguistic detail, which falls outside the primary focus of this thesis. Therefore, a thematic analysis is assessed to be the most useful method, as it balances between a structured approach and a flexible interpretation of the interview subject's experiences.

Diving further into the different approaches to thematic analysis, multiple approaches appear to be relevant, but especially two methods stand out: Kvale and Brinkmann's method of meaning condensation (Kvale and Brinkmann 2015), and Braun and Clarke's method of coding (Braun and Clarke 2021). Kvale and Brinkmann's method of meaning condensation has its strengths in its focus on distilling interview data, which is an advantage if the goal is to summarise the statements made in the interviews. However, as the goal of this thesis is to investigate how Generation Z collectively construct opinions about employer branding, it is crucial to sense the patterns and connections in the interview data, and based on this, I came to the conclusion that meaning condensation would not be sufficient to investigate the research topic.

Instead, Braun and Clarke's coding method has a systematic analysis approach that allows for me to identify, analyse and report themes in the interview data. In relation to my social constructivist approach, the method is especially relevant as it not only covers what is being said, but also how meaning is created through language and social interactions.

5.3.2. Data collection methods

In relation to the qualitative research approach of this thesis, the data collection methods are highly influenced by this.

The data that constitutes the empirical data has been collected with a qualitative approach. More specifically, it has been collected through semi-structured interviews (Andersen et al. 2012, 149).

A semi-structured interview is defined by a pre-defined set of questions prepared by the interviewer, but the approach takes the flow of the interview into consideration. This means that there may be situations where it makes sense to deviate slightly from the questions, ask follow-up questions or elaborative questions. Thereby the pre-defined questions function as an interview guide to ensure that the themes of the interview are covered.

For the purpose of this thesis, the semi-structured interview approach has been especially relevant as both employer branding and job preferences are complex and dependent on context. These aspects may not always be possible to cover through standardised questions and quantitative methods. The flexible approach of structured interviews ensures that the interview subjects are given the opportunity to elaborate on their experiences and opinions to reflect their own individual understanding of the labour market.

The first interview subject that has been interviewed for the purpose of this thesis is a representative from Generation Z. The interview subject is chosen, firstly, based on his year of birth, which is the year 2000. As previously established, Generation Z in this thesis is defined as people born between the years 1995 and 2012 (Twenge 2017, 9), and therefore, the interview subject fits the category. Although the generational theory by Mannheim states that generations cannot be categorised simply based on their age, the time in which people have been born can be an indicator of their general generational opinions and experiences based on the fact that people within the same time period most likely have the same historical and societal experiences. Therefore, the first criterium has been that the interview subject must be part of Generation Z, which is defined as people born in 1995 until 2012. Additionally, the respondent has had experience with the labour market through several different part time jobs, which gives him a solid foundation to base his answers on experience. The interview has revolved around the respondent's own personal experiences and opinions on the topic of both values and expectations regarding the labour market, as well as his opinion on employer branding strategies in general. It is important to note that the respondent's answers provide only an insight to one individual's personal opinions and experiences and can therefore not be considered an exact representation of the entire generation.

The respondent from Randstad has been chosen based on their employment status at the organisation. The main criterium in this case has been the respondent's experience with Randstad's employer branding strategy and their knowledge of this, and therefore, the respondent has been

chosen based on their title in the organisation. This has been important in order to gain an insight to the organisation's employer branding strategies, and the thoughts and assessments that are put into the strategies. By interviewing a respondent who works with these aspects in their daily work, the level of credibility can be considered much higher than that of an employer who works in a different field within the organisation.

Both interviews have been transcribed using a simple transcription style, as the focus of the transcription is on what is being said and the general context rather than how it is said. In the transcriptions, the interview subjects will be referred to by their first names, Cayden and Maria, respectively¹.

5.3.3. Analysis methods

In order to investigate how Generation Z's expectations and preferences to the labour market is reflected in Randstad's employer branding strategy, the interviews that constitute the empirical data will be analysed using Braun and Clarke's method of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2021).

The thematic analysis has been chosen based on its ability to break down data and divide it into central themes. This provides the opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding of the themes that are present in the data by identifying patterns and holding this up against social and cultural aspects. In relation to this particular research, this means that the themes and patterns found in the collected data provides a foundation to investigate how Randstad's employer branding strategies correspond to the themes found in the interviews.

Braun and Clarke's approach to thematic analysis is divided into six phases which are each elaborated on in the following section.

Phase 1: Familiarisation

The first phase in Braun and Clarke's approach to thematic analysis is familiarisation with the data (Braun & Clarke 2021, 42), in this case the interviews conducted in the making of this thesis. In practice, this means that I have firstly listened to the interview recordings and transcribed the interviews to strengthen my understanding of the data. The transcription, in this case, has been

¹ In accordance with GDPR legislation, consent forms from both interview subjects are available and can be provided upon request.

done using intelligent verbatim transcription (Appen 2021), as the contents of the data are more important than the linguistic elements. Therefore, filler words such as *uhm*, *ah*, and *er* have been left out in the transcription process.

Based on the transcriptions, it becomes possible to gain an overview of the data leading to the following phase.

Phase 2: Doing coding

The familiarisation of the data including transcribing the data allows me to dive into the actual coding of the data. Coding refers to the practice of identifying and naming interesting statements (Braun and Clarke 2021, 60). This process is done in continuation of the first phase by reading the transcription carefully, marking any interesting or potentially interesting passages dividing them into subjects. Coding the data enables me to further categorise the data into themes due to the extensive understanding of the contents of the interviews.

Phase 3: Generating initial themes

Once the phase of coding is done, and all of the transcribed data is divided, it becomes possible to identify themes across the codes (Braun and Clarke 2021, 79). Not only are the initial themes formed based on the patterns in the coding, but they are also based on their relevance to the thesis subject.

In practice, this phase has been carried out in the way that both interviews have firstly been coded, after which the codes have been compared in order to identify any patterns across the interviews. Once this has been done, it becomes possible to narrow the clusters of codes into regular themes. It is important to note that at this stage, the themes are still preliminary.

Phase 4: Developing and reviewing themes

After having divided the codes into the preliminary themes, the next step in the thematic analysis is to review and develop the themes (Braun and Clarke 2021, 97).

For this step, I have gone through each of the preliminary themes to confirm that there is coherence between the codes in the given theme. Once this has been determined, I have gathered direct quotes from the data that represent each theme. By dividing the interviews into direct quotes to fit each

theme, it becomes possible to gain a more comprehensive overview of the themes, thus making it possible to create a collective narrative of the interviews.

Phase 5: Refining, defining and naming themes

The fifth phase of Braun and Clarke's method to thematic analysis, is refining, defining and naming the themes (Braun and Clarke 2021, 108). In this phase, I have given a description of each theme and how it relates to the research subject as well as making clear distinction between the themes.

Phase 6: Writing matters for analysis

The sixth and final step is to gather all of the themes and conduct a final analysis.

The final phase serves the purpose of using the knowledge that I have gained in the making of the analysis to create a compelling argument to answer the problem statement of this thesis. The final analysis will be presented in the following chapter, in which each phase will be presented in depth, processing both data from the interviews conducted in relation to this thesis as well as supporting data in the form of reports and employer branding material from Randstad.

6. Analysis

This chapter consists of the analysis of the presented empirical data. The purpose of the analysis is to investigate how Generation Z's expectations and values in regard to the labour market are represented in Randstad's employer branding strategy.

With a standpoint in the research question, the analysis both investigates what the new generation demands in an employer as well as how Randstad works strategically to adjust its communication and value proposition to these needs.

The analysis is based on qualitative empirical data consisting of two semi-structured interviews with a representative from Generation Z and an employer from Randstad, respectively. The findings from these interviews are supported with secondary data consisting of Randstad's annual Workmonitor from 2025 (Randstad 2025), which is a global labour market analysis providing valuable insights into the opinions, expectations, and behaviours of workers. Based on interviews with employees from various industries and countries, it explores topics such as

workplace culture, career development, job satisfaction, work-life balance, labour market trends, remote work, flexibility, and the impact of work on mental health and employee satisfaction.

To ensure a systematic and meaningful interpretation of the empirical data, I have divided the data into five themes using Braun and Clarke's method of coding. The identified themes from the interviews will constitute a red line throughout the analysis and will function as a link between empiricism and theory.

To clarify the analytical process in practice, a concrete example is presented here of how interview statements were coded and subsequently translated into a central theme. During the coding process several statements were revealed across the two interviews, that express a common wish for autonomy and flexible working conditions. These statements were initially assigned the following codes:

Interview quote	Initial code
"I value flexibility" (Cayden) "I want autonomy" (Cayden) "place that appreciates autonomy" (Cayden)	Autonomy and flexibility as core values
"able to work from home" (Cayden)	Preference for remote work
"my schedule is changing all the time" (Cayden)	Flexible and unstable work schedules
"looking for something that represents more than work" (Maria)	EVP aligned with autonomy and identity
"Able to kind of turn on a dime depending on who you're speaking with" (Maria)	Flexible communication strategy

(Appendix 3)

The codes presented in the scheme were all sorted in the sub-theme of *Autonomy and flexibility* as they each concern the need for autonomy and control to plan the work. Afterwards, this sub-theme was sorted under the theme of *Working conditions*, which covers the central expectations that Generation Z has to the labour market. This example illustrates how the themes are grounded in the interview material, and how the themes are created across the perspectives of both employee and employer. Elaborate overview of the coding and thematic sorting of the rest of the themes can be found in the appendix (Appendix 3).

The following analysis is divided into four sub-chapters. The first sub-chapter investigates Generation Z's values and expectations in the labour market and how these are shaped by a sociocultural background based on Mannheim and Twenge's generational theoretical perspectives. Based on this, the second sub-chapter investigates the themes from a generational theoretical perspective, in order to identify how Mannheim and Twenge's findings correspond with the statements from the interview with the Generation Z respondent Cayden and the findings from Randstad's Workmonitor. The third sub-chapter investigates how these expectations constitute a basis for the creation of psychological contracts, and how organisations may risk violating these. This will be compared to the identified themes from the interviews in order to investigate how psychological contracts are reflected in the themes. Finally, the third sub-chapter dives into Randstad's employer branding and employee value proposition and to what degree it correlates with the wishes and needs that characterises Generation Z. The three sub-chapters will all follow a thematic review from the perspective of each sub-chapters focus, i.e., generational theoretical perspective, psychological contract perspective and employer branding perspective. Additionally, the findings from the conducted interviews will be supported by Randstad's Workmonitor.

Before diving into the analysis, the identified themes are presented including a description of each theme as well as sub-themes within the respective theme:

Main Themes	Sub-themes	Description
Working conditions		
	Autonomy and flexibility	Desire for flexibility, remote work, and autonomy in daily tasks.
	Career development and progression	Expectations of personal and career development as motivators.
	Job security and stability	Concerns about employment stability and long-term job security.
	Work-life balance and personal work moral	Balancing work with personal life and maintaining healthy boundaries.
Management		

	Trust and communication	Need for open, honest communication and mutual trust with management.
	Negative experience and boundaries	Experiences with poor leadership and violation of personal boundaries.
	Work environment and employee retention	Cultural and relational factors affecting motivation and retention.
Values and Employer branding		
	Goals and values	Alignment between organisational values and personal ethical standards.
	Honesty and authenticity	Preference for transparency, authenticity, and realistic messaging.
	Employer branding and attraction	Employer branding as a tool to attract and retain younger employees.
	Employee involvement	Desire to be involved in meaningful organisational initiatives and decisions.
Generation Z's identity and preferences		
	Value driven work life	Importance of purpose-driven work and alignment with social values.
	Intergenerational understanding	Navigating and understanding generational differences at work.
	Work moral	Strong sense of responsibility, ambition, and personal work ethic.
Technology		
	Technological optimisation	Using digital tools and AI to increase efficiency at work.
	Humanness vs. Automation	Balancing automation with the need for human empathy and connection.

6.1. Defining Generation Z

In order to assess to what extent Randstad's employer branding accommodates Generation Z's preferences and needs, it is crucial to firstly investigate the actual values and expectations that characterise the generation in relation to their work life. The themes found in the interview with the respondent from Generation Z, alongside the theoretical perspectives from Mannheim and Twenge will be analysed in this sub-chapter to investigate how social and historical conditions have shaped the generation's work-related ideals. The purpose of this section is to highlight the key points that stand out as particularly meaningful to Generation Z, and thereby constitute an essential benchmark for how organisations ought to position themselves in their employer branding.

To create an analytical framework for understanding Generation Z's expectations and behaviour in the labour market, it is relevant to examine the generation through Mannheim's key generational concepts: *generational location*, *generational actuality*, and *generation unit*. These concepts offer insight into how historical and social contexts not only influence a generation's collective identity but also shape their attitudes and actions. In the following analysis, particular focus will be placed on *generational location* and *generational actuality* to explore both the historical conditions that have shaped Generation Z's upbringing and how these conditions have been processed and translated into shared generational expectations. As outlined in the theory section, Twenge defines Generation Z as those born between 1995 and 2012 (Twenge 2017, 9), which situates the generation's formative years within a period marked by rapid digital transformation, economic instability, and global crises, which can be considered defining elements of their *generational location*. During this time period, the world has faced enormous change that inarguably have had a large impact on the generation that has experienced it first hand in their formative years. To Generation Z, the global digitalisation and technological breakthrough has been one of the most significant factors to define their generational placement and thus their collective experiences. Whereas Generation Z's predecessors have grown up in a time, where digital technology was not as common, and therefore had to adjust to the concept, Generation Z is the first generation to be born directly into a digitalised world (Telecoming 2024). With the spread of the internet, the invention of the smartphone and the constant availability of internet and social media, technology has become not only a tool, but also an integrated part of their social lives. In addition to the impact

that digitalisation has had on the generation's personal lives, it has also had an impact on workplaces and how Generation Z, being the next generation to enter the labour market, shape their expectations in this regard. The digitalisation has for instance raised an expectation to technological accessibility, flexible ways of working and integration of new technology (Techstep 2024).

Another historical event that has contributed to the shaping of Generation Z's behaviour and preferences in the labour market is the financial crisis in 2008 (Federal Reserve History n.d.) and the aftermath of this. Although only children at the time, many individuals within Generation Z have felt a large impact of the financial crisis in the sense that many individuals have seen their parents lose their job, and they have experienced financial insecurity during the time. Seeing their previous generations manage the consequences first-hand, Generation Z show tendencies to be much more economically aware and showing more motivation to save money rather than spending it on pleasure right away (Harland Clarke 2017, 4). This perception of money and financial insecurity can be directly applied to Generation Z's expectations of the labour market. Studies show that Generation Z are more inclined to working multiple jobs, and they are less positive that the overall financial insecurity has a foreseeable end (Dua et al. 2022).

One of the most recent historical and societal events is the Covid-19 pandemic, which in many ways have impacted Generation Z's lives in regard to their social, educational and professional experiences. When Covid-19 spread rapidly in the early 2020, a large number of Generation Z was in the process of pursuing an education or maybe about to enter the labour market for the first time, and here the pandemic has indeed left its mark. Due to the lockdown and restrictions of physical interactions, people had to adapt to digital interactions when meeting for work or class. This form of interaction has in many ways contributed to creating a standard for Generation Z's expectations of areas such as flexibility and technological setup (Space Matrix 2025).

However, even with the opportunity of digital interaction, the lack of social interactions has affected the generation to a large extent. For instance, since 2020, Generation Z shows a 25% increase in people with mental health issues (Nuttall n.d.).

Applying these findings to the generation's behaviour in the labour market, the pandemic and its aftermath has also had a large impact on this, as mental health has become an important agenda

with more than 60% of Generation Z valuing mental health care as number one workplace benefit (Mikhail 2022).

While generational location and actuality offers insight to how historical and societal events shape the overall worldview and values of Generation Z, Mannheim's concept of generation units allow for a more nuanced understanding of the internal diversity within the generation. Despite sharing a common temporal and societal context, individuals within a generation may process and respond to these experiences differently. In the following, this concept will be used to explore how various subgroups within Generation Z form distinct attitudes, priorities, and behaviours, particularly in relation to the labour market and workplace expectations.

In relation to Generation Z, it is relevant to understand that the generation is not a homogeneous group, but, on the contrary, consists of different segments that behave differently based on their social backgrounds, level of education, media usage and values. Within the labour market, this can for instance identify certain sub-groups, referred to as units.

These units typically occur as reactions to common societal events that are interpreted differently depending on individual and social contexts. In the interview data, there are some examples of such differences, which will be touched upon in the further analysis.

In regard to employer branding, this means that one collective strategy may not be sufficient to attract Generation Z. Taking generational units into account, an organisation thus may benefit from having differentiated employee value propositions and communication strategies that appeal to more generation units within the same age cohort, thereby resonating with different parts of the generation, which ultimately can strengthen the organisation's attraction and retention of employees.

6.2. Generation Z's expectations of the labour market

After having placed Generation Z in Mannheim's theoretic concepts, the analysis will proceed by investigating how these perspectives are reflected in the respective themes found in the interviews. The following section will explore each theme and how they relate to Generation Z's collective identity, values and expectations.

The purpose of this is to illustrate how the tendencies and opinions that are expressed in the interviews are not only individual opinions, but reflect a broader generational pattern formed by collective societal experiences and interpretations.

6.2.1. Working conditions

The first theme found in the interview is *Working conditions*. This theme covers the expectations and needs that the Generation Z interview subject Cayden expresses in relation to flexible working conditions. This includes autonomy, career development and progression, job security and work-life balance.

Throughout the interview, Cayden shows a clear preference towards autonomy and flexibility in his work life. This becomes evident from his statement that he values “*a place that appreciates autonomy*” (Appendix 1, l. 112-113), and additionally in the statement “*I see the head designers that I work with and... they’re able to work from home and they’re able to dictate the projects*” (Appendix 1, l. 110-112). According to Twenge’s research, flexibility and the option of balancing work and free time is amongst the highest priorities to this generation (Twenge 2017). Randstad’s Workmonitor from 2025 also supports these findings: According to the labour market analysis, 73% of respondents worldwide prioritise flexible work hours, while 67% emphasise flexibility in terms of location as an important factor (Randstad 2025, 12).

In relation to Mannheim’s concept of generational actuality, these statements can be interpreted as an active processing of the historical and societal events that Generation Z is shaped by. This is in the sense that digitalisation and the Covid-19 pandemic to a large extent has made the concept of remote and hybrid work a normalised reality. This has arguably caused Generation Z to form expectations that their workplace adapts to the employees’ needs and lifestyle as opposed to their predecessors who, on the contrary, are more likely to adapt to the workplace. The wish for flexibility and autonomy may very well be seen as a part of the concept of work-life balance, which has shown to be a large factor in recent years. According to Randstad’s Workmonitor, work-life balance shows to be the most important factor alongside job security, ranking at 73% (Randstad 2025, 12). This is also acknowledged by Cayden in his statement that “*broadly the work-life balance is extremely important*” (Appendix 1, l. 156). However, what stands out in this regard is Cayden’s contradictory opinion when it comes to his own personal experience, that “*in terms of how important work-life balance is, I don’t think it’s that important at all, for me specifically*” (Appendix 1, l. 154-155). By this, Cayden acknowledges work-life balance as an important factor in general, but not as an important factor in his own personal life.

In relation to Cayden's low interest in work-life balance, it is highly relevant to review the sub-theme of career development and progression. Cayden expresses "*ambition and having a desire to climb*" (Appendix 1, l. 222), which correlates well with the Workmonitor's findings that progression at training is a highly valued aspect (Randstad 2025, 29). In regard to Cayden's opinions, however, his statements about not finding work-life balance important and having ambition, suggest that he believes that one option rules out the other, which is further supported by his statement that "*You either work or you have a life*" (Appendix 1, l. 149). Applying this to Mannheim's generational concepts, this can arguably be seen as an illustration of a generation unit in the sense that despite work-life balance being the general top priority, there are people – or units – within Generation Z who do not value the factor to the same extent. In relation to the generational location in which the interview person is situated, this can be interpreted as a response to economic and societal insecurity.

The complexity in Cayden's statements is a testament that employer branding ought not to be based solely on a stereotypical view of Generation Z as a singular unit, but ought to be nuanced and flexible to capture different levels of ambitions and values within the same generation.

6.2.2. Management

The second theme is *Management*. This theme represents Cayden's reflections of his expectations of the management in his workplace. In relation to the previously stated wish for autonomy, this also includes an expectation of mutual trust between employer and employee, as he states that "*if I'm going to trust them with keeping me around [...] I would also like for them to trust me that I'm going to do my part and do it well.*" (Appendix 1, l. 336-338). In the light of Cayden's generational actuality, this strong expectation of mutual trust can be interpreted as a reaction to the societal context influenced by flat organisational structures and an increased focus on mental health. Randstad's Workmonitor once again supports trust as being a significant factor in employee satisfaction, and if the feeling of trust is not met, this may lead to the experience of a toxic workplace. In addition to this, the Workmonitor shows that people are becoming more inclined to quit their jobs if they experience a toxic workplace with an increase from 33% in 2024 to 43% in 2025 (Randstad 2025, 23). This is also reflected in Cayden's responses to the topic, where he states that he "*had left a previous job because the manager was saying horrible things about another co-worker*" (Appendix 1, l. 379-380). This low tolerance to toxic behaviour from management aligns

well with Twenge's findings that Generation Z generally values psychological security and respect in their environment.

In summary, this theme presents how Generation Z reacts to its contemporary society by demanding respectful, trust based and flexible work relations, where both autonomy and responsible management is highly regarded. This further emphasises the need for employer branding strategies to be adjusted to these expectations, especially if the desire is to attract and retain young employees with strong value-based demands to their management.

6.2.3. Values and employer branding

The third theme to be reviewed is *Values and employer branding*. The theme reflects on Cayden's statements regarding his personal values in regard to his career.

Based on Cayden's statements, there is a clear indication that ethical responsibility is a highly important factor in his expectations of his employer, which is especially expressed in the statement: "*I definitely don't want to be anywhere evil*" (Appendix 1, l. 114). Applying this opinion in Mannheim's concept of generation units, the statement can be seen as an example of this, in the sense that Generation Z has shown to be a generation to have several personal causes when it comes to ethical responsibilities. This includes equality and social justice, environmental concerns, sustainability, inclusivity and diversity to name a few (Sus 2025). Although it is not explicitly stated if the perception of 'evil' is directed at any specific cause, it can be assumed that some causes are closer to heart than others, and therefore, fits the concept of generation unit. In relation to Randstad's Workmonitor, this aligns well with the finding that 48% of people would not accept a job with an organisation whose values do not align with their own (Randstad 2025, 6).

This can further be seen in correlation to Cayden's opinions on employer branding strategies. In a time where these ethical causes have indeed become more widespread, it is becoming more common for organisations to brand themselves as aware of these – sometimes, without actually living up to their own promises. This can for instance be in terms of greenwashing (CSR n.d.) or diversity washing (Cahn 2024), where an organisation fails to live up to their promises in regard to their ethical responsibilities. These concerns also lead to the demand of honest and transparent employer branding, which is evident in Cayden's statements when it comes to how he might evaluate a potential workplace. Here, he emphasises testimonials as a beneficial way to evaluate the honesty of a workplace as "*that's about as real as it gets*" (Appendix 1, l. 190).

Additionally, Cayden emphasises the individual responsibility to assess an organisation's employer branding and its alignment with personal values: "*it is then your responsibility to decide if it aligns with what you're looking for*" (Appendix 1, l. 433-434).

The theme of *Values and employer branding* highlights Generation Z's heightened focus on value alignment and ethical responsibility in relation to their career choices. Cayden's reflections illustrate a generation that expects employers to demonstrate authenticity, transparency and consistency between brand and practice. Employer branding strategies should therefore not only signal awareness of social and ethical issues but must also be grounded in demonstrable organisational behaviours. For companies aiming to attract Generation Z, it becomes crucial to avoid performative branding and instead build value-based narratives that reflect the lived employee experience.

6.2.4. Generation Z's expectations and preferences

The fourth central theme is *Generation Z's identities and preferences*.

Here, Cayden shows a significant reflection of the stereotypes and prejudice that is often connected to younger generations: "*The adults are like, 'these lazy kids, they're just doing dumb stuff all the time'. It's like, maybe you should just be upfront about it*" (Appendix 1, l. 430-431). This statement both indicates a defensiveness towards these stereotypes, but it can also be interpreted as an expression of honesty and respect, which aligns with the findings from the previous theme that Generation Z values transparency.

Additionally, Cayden expresses a certain level of self-consciousness when it comes to the dynamics between generations, as he states: "*I think the amount of respect and understanding ebbs and flows between Gen Z and the other generations*" (Appendix 1, l. 439-440). This statement in combination with the statement that "*It's easy for us to look at Gen Alpha and be like, 'they're brain rotted...', but that's what everyone else is thinking about us*" (Appendix 1, l. 440-441), shows a thoughtful reflection of the dynamics that can occur between different generations. This can also be seen as a representation of Generation Z generally being a generation that is quite aware of their own identity but is also able to consider themselves part of a bigger historical and cultural continuum, which is central to Manheim's understanding of generation as both shaped by and cocreating of their own social context.

In summary, this theme illustrates Generation Z's strong self-awareness and demand for mutual respect across generations. Employer branding should reflect this by acknowledging generational diversity and avoiding stereotypical portrayals. Instead, strategies should emphasise authenticity, inclusion and intergenerational understanding.

6.2.5. Technology

The fifth theme in the interviews is *Technology*. As previously established, the technological development, and especially the digital emergence has had a large impact on Generation Z's generational location. One of the most recent emergences in terms of digitalisation is the invention of AI, which indeed has gained traction in the workplace. This is also something that Cayden is aware of and considers in relation to his future work: *"I think the biggest threat, if you can even call it that - I don't think it is - is AI"* (Appendix 1, l. 174-175). This statement can further be interpreted as placing Cayden within a generational actuality, as it shows that he not only accepts that the use of AI is now a factor, but also that he reflects on it and its implications for his future in the labour market.

Furthermore, Cayden expresses a level of trust that human interaction is irreplaceable despite the rapid advance of AI: *"I don't think there will be a replacement for the way humans communicate visually with other humans [...] You can't really recreate that with a machine."* (Appendix 1, l. 174-177). These statements additionally portray Generation Z as a generation who is comfortable with the presence of technology, but at the same time seeks to preserve the human aspect of work. In order to do so, it is highly important to be familiar with the actual technology and to understand how to use it as a tool. According to the Workmonitor, the number of people who are unwilling to take a job that does not offer the opportunity to receive training in advanced technology has increased from 36% to 44% in only one year (Randstad 2025). Once again this aligns well with Cayden's perception of technology as an integrated part of the future of work.

In summary, this theme highlights Generation Z's dual attitude toward technology: They embrace digitalisation but insist on preserving the human element in work. Employer branding should reflect this balance by promoting access to digital upskilling while emphasising human connection, collaboration and ethical tech use.

Throughout the five themes, it becomes evident that Generation Z is a highly value driven generation. The results from the Workmonitor combined with Cayden's statements portrays an image of a generation who are reflective of their work and their values in the sense that a job to Generation Z is about more than salary and titles. Generation Z seeks purpose, authenticity and autonomy.

Understanding what drives and motivates Generation Z is crucial in attracting and retaining employees of the generation, and organisations ought to carefully consider these aspects as an incorporated part in their employer branding.

6.3. Generation Z's expectations in a psychological contract perspective

In order to understand how Generation Z's expectations of the labour market are shaped and how these may impact their relationship with an employer, it is highly relevant to analyse the themes through Rousseau's theory of psychological contracts. As presented in the theory section, Rousseau's theory states that a psychological contract occurs through the individual's perception and interpretation of the signals and messages that they receive from an organisation even before employment.

The following sub-chapter reviews each of the five themes and how they each relate to psychological contracts. The purpose of this is to investigate how experiences and opinions may be interpreted as expressions of expectations and implicit contract terms through employer and employee. In addition to reviewing the themes found in the interview conducted with the Generation Z respondent Cayden, excerpts from the interview with the Randstad respondent Maria will be included in the review to support the analytical findings.

6.3.1. Working conditions

In the analysis of Cayden's statements in regard to the theme *Working conditions* it is clear that flexibility and autonomy is a crucial factor in how the psychological contract is built. The respondent expresses a need for autonomy and control of his work (Appendix 1, l. 112-113), which demonstrates a psychological contract where the workplace supports the individual's need for autonomy and personal responsibility. As mentioned in the theory section, the psychological contract is created through subjective interpretations of direct and indirect messages. In this case, the contract may be based on previous experiences with management and flexibility. When

autonomy is valued as much as in this case, it can be an expression that the respondent implicitly expects that a workplace offers the frames to support this form of independence without it necessarily being explicitly stated by the employer. Thereby a relational psychological contract is established with a focus of mutual respect and personal development.

Another indicator of the implicit expectation of development options is the respondent's statement that he is "*at the very foundation and so expanding and moving up is pretty much the only thing I can see*" (Appendix 1, l. 163-164). By saying this, it can be interpreted that Cayden approaches the labour market with an expectation of being able to progress in his position, which further can be interpreted that he has an expectation of long-term employment at his future workplace. This can be seen in correlation to Rousseau's concept of relational contracts, where open ended time frames are characteristic. Furthermore, the respondent's strong focus on career development indicates that stagnant conditions are perceived as unattractive and may lead to dissatisfaction, which may further lead to the respondent leaving the workplace if these demands are unable to be met, corresponding to the exit-response in Rousseau's presentation of response types. However, Cayden does also show a more active-constructive approach, which Rousseau refers to as *voice*, by stating that "*When I have a goal or something that I need to do, I will just keep doing it until it's done and I love to be obsessive about it*" (Appendix 1, l. 150-151). This is a clear indication that the respondent takes ownership of his work and does not simply wait for things to change, but that he will work actively to progress. The expectation of career development and progression is also found in the Randstad employee's statements, as she states that "*it's very important for Generation Z to be able to come in and understand what they contribute today, but what does that mean tomorrow for them...*" (Appendix 2, l. 71--72). This supports the mutual expectation of contributory development between employee and employer, creating a foundational term in the psychological contract between Generation Z and their future employers.

Another aspect that falls under the theme of *Working conditions* is job security, which is also a significant factor to bear in mind when it comes to psychological contracts. Randstad's Workmonitor finds that 76% of respondents from Generation Z rank job security as an important factor when it comes to their future jobs (Randstad 2025, 12). This is also reflected in the interview with Cayden as he states: "*I value it (job security) very heavily...*" (Appendix 1, l. 181). Although it has previously been established that Generation Z is a generation that values flexibility, there is still a strong desire for job security among the individuals. In terms of how the aspect of job

security impacts the psychological contract, Rousseau argues that the psychological contract is often shaped already prior to employment (Rousseau 1995, 34) based on signals such as reputation, employer branding and job descriptions. Based on this, it is highly likely that Generation Z are inclined to interpret signals such as opportunities for career development as an implicit promise of job security once again contributing to the creation of the psychological contract.

The Randstad employee, however, states that there has been a decrease in the demand for job security, as “*job security, long-term tenure at a company [...] have been much greater than what you’re seeing related to purpose to well-being*”. While the statement does not directly dismiss job security as an important factor, it does show that it is decreasingly important in contrary to other factors such as well-being, and while this may be true, it is crucial that an organisation such as Randstad still takes the factor seriously when communicating their employer brand, or it may possibly result in an unintended violation of the psychological contract.

Through the review of the theme *working conditions*, it becomes clear that Cayden’s expectations of the labour market and his future workplace is not only influenced by practical conditions, but also to a large extent by relational elements. The demand for autonomy, flexibility and career development opportunities reflects an expectation that the workplace supports his personal and professional growth which is a key element to relational contracts (Rousseau 1995, 91). The theme also shows that Generation Z demands purpose in their jobs, which further suggests a type of psychological contract where the relationship to the employer is built upon mutual trust and engagement, and where the organisation’s ability to accommodate these needs are crucial to maintain loyalty and well-being.

6.3.2. Management

The second theme to be reviewed in relation to how it impacts the creation of psychological contracts is *Management*. In the interview with Cayden, he expresses that good management is largely dependent on the manager’s approach to trust, mutual respect and appreciation (Appendix 1, l. 336-339). By emphasising this expectation of mutuality, the aspect of a relational contract is once again reinforced as the statement supports a psychological understanding between the two parties. If this demand is not met, it can be considered a violation of the psychological contract which can have severe consequences for the employment. An example of this is Cayden’s statement that he has previously left a job due to a manager who was speaking badly about another

colleague (Appendix 1, l. 379-380). Although the experience was not directed at the respondent but at one of his colleagues, the experience can still be considered a violation of the psychological contract term of mutual respect and trust, as the terms of a contract is not necessarily limited to including only the individual and their employer. In this case, the manager has failed to live up to Cayden's contract term of mutual respect, which shows to include everyone in the organisation. Additionally, the Workmonitor's statistics that 49% of Generation Z employees would quit their job in case of a toxic work environment supports Rousseau's exit response type. By this, poor management proves to be a significantly important factor to Generation Z.

The importance of proper communication is also reflected in Maria's statement that *"listening is first being aware of what Generation Z is, what's important to them, so listening is a key thing there and also whether it be through Workmonitor or other engaging conversations, we have what we call proof points. So, whatever it is that we offer, make sure that aligns with whatever generation it is."* (Appendix 2, l. 115-118). This statement shows that Randstad actively works to include feedback from their current and potential employees. This is for instance by conducting the Workmonitor and using this as a proof point to ensure that management and employer branding is aligned with the employees' expectations. Once again, this reflects Rousseau's point that psychological contracts are shaped by communicated signals.

Throughout the theme, it becomes clear that the experience of poor management, e.g., lack of respect and unfair treatment, may lead to the experience of contract violation. In relation to Rousseau's theory, such violation can activate certain response types in the employees. For instance, when Cayden says that he has actively left a job due to poor management, it is equivalent to the passive-destructive exit response. However, he also expresses that *"the conditions would have to be pretty bad"* (Appendix 1, l. 367) for him to leave. Additionally, he states that *"I can more or less stay in my lane enough to be fine and really kind of have it roll off my back"* (Appendix 1, l. 378-379). These statements on the other hand may be interpreted as a response of loyalty, where he would rather stay in a job despite dissatisfaction in the hope that the situation might improve. Thereby, the exchange between these two response types supports the fact that the experience of management has a significant impact on Generation Z's retention and well-being, and that mutual respect and trust is crucial to maintain the relational bond between employee and employer.

6.3.3. Values and employer branding

In continuation of the second theme, the third theme, i.e., *Values and employer branding* focuses on the importance of alignment between personal and organisational values. Throughout this theme, Cayden's statements give a clear impression that he has large expectations of authenticity and alignment in values. This becomes evident in his statements that he does not "*want to be anywhere evil*" (Appendix 1, l. 114) and that "*honesty, even if the truth isn't super pretty, is better than trying to be deceitful*" (Appendix 1, l. 271-272). These statements illustrate how the respondents' expectations of a future employer are highly impacted by their transparency and moral integrity. This once again points towards a relational psychological contract where these aspects are very important.

In relation to Rousseau's description that psychological contracts are mainly based on the individual's perception and cognitive interpretation of signals and communication (Rousseau 1995, 34), Cayden highlights how testimonials and consistency have a central role in employer branding, and that these are key aspects that he is looking for when considering a workplace (Appendix 1, l. 189-190). This can be interpreted as an emphasis of how employer branding is indeed a type of implicit promise made by the organisation. In the event of discrepancy between the claims of the branding and the perceived reality, this can lead to a contract violation on the organisation's part. However, discrepancy in such cases is rarely intentional, and therefore, such violation can be categorised as an inadvertent contract violation due to the misalignment in the communicated signals.

The Workmonitor also shows that Generation Z is willing to take action in the event of such contract violation. As previously presented, it appears from the Workmonitor that 46% of people are willing to leave a job if there is a misalignment in values, and 29% have actively quit a job due to disagreement with the leadership's views (Randstad 2025, 6), which is a clear example of the exit response type.

Also Maria takes a standpoint in this regard, as she states that "*whatever it is that we offer, make sure that aligns with whatever generation it is*" (Appendix 2, l. 117-118), as well as puts emphasis on the importance of employee involvement in regard to charitable causes: "*Tell us why and if it aligns with the direction of the foundation that is something that we will continue to start to do some work with*" (Appendix 2, l. 128-129). This signals an attempt to create an employer branding that reflects the employees' personal values, and thereby an attempt to prevent

misalignment. On a strategic level, this insight is supported by the Workmonitor's find that 43% of Generation Z are more inclined to deprioritising pay in favour of making a contribution to society through their work (Randstad 2025, 21). This shows that value-based work is deeply rooted in Generation Z's creation of psychological contracts to such an extent that it becomes a key component in their motivation and loyalty. In summary, the review of the theme shows that values and employer branding play an important part in psychological contracts, and that alignment between employee and employer in this regard creates a strong potential for long-term loyalty, whereas discrepancy may lead to the employee resorting to leaving the organisation.

6.3.4. Generation Z's identity and preferences

The fourth theme about identity and preferences constitute a central part of Generation Z's approach to the labour market and how their psychological contracts are formed.

On multiple occasions throughout the interview, Cayden emphasises how identity and authenticity are crucial to his assessment of a workplace. This is both seen in his statement that he does not *"want to be anywhere evil"* (Appendix 1, l. 114) and the statement that *"if you don't like the message, you're going to be miserable"* (Appendix 1, l. 115-116). These statements clearly indicate that Cayden's expectations are not only rooted in external conditions such as salary and flexibility, but also to a large extent in a value-based alignment and honesty.

These expectations, however, are not necessarily explicitly expressed by the employer, as they are often created in the exposure to branding and the organisation's behaviour. This further supports Rousseau's point that psychological contracts are shaped on the basis of informal signals and the employee's individual perception of these.

If this implicit contract based on trust, shared values, and authentic communication is broken, the reaction is often emotional and decisive for the future of the relationship, according to Rousseau. Several of Cayden's statements point to a low tolerance for violations of this type of contract. For instance, the statement *"If you think for even a second and something seems off, then it probably is."* (Appendix 1, l. 282). This can be interpreted as a testament that authenticity is highly important when it comes to the initial impression of an organisation, which aligns well with Rousseau's presentation that psychological contracts may even be shaped before the actual employment. Therefore, it is crucial for an organisation to be aware of the signals it communicates, or it may lead to contract violation in a later setting. This is also supported by Cayden's statement

that “*honesty, even if the truth isn’t super pretty, is better than trying to be deceitful.*” (Appendix 1, l. 271-272). These statements indicate that Generation Z is highly aware of authenticity and experiences breaches of this kind of informal contract as a violation of trust. This suggests that relational contracts are central to this generation. A violation of such a contract may trigger reactions such as exit or voice, depending on the degree of disappointment and the perceived possibility of influencing the situation. Once again this is also supported by Maria’s statement that there needs to be alignment in what Randstad offers and the demands from the respective generations (Appendix 2, l. 117-118). This illustrates how employer branding can be used strategically to manage expectations and reduce the risk of contract violation, as the psychological contract is not based on formal agreements, but on the perception that the employer genuinely means what they communicate.

The theme highlights that Generation Z’s psychological contracts are largely founded on a sense of shared values with their workplace. Violations of these value-based expectations can lead to strong emotional reactions and a high likelihood of opting out of the organisation. Randstad’s Workmonitor 2025 confirms this tendency, showing that value and purpose driven leadership is crucial to meeting Generation Z’s expectations. Organisations must therefore understand and respect the generation specific psychological contract and apply employer branding strategically and authentically if they wish to attract and retain this generation.

6.3.5. Technology

The fifth and last theme from the interviews is Technology. This theme plays a central role in Generation Z’s expectations of their work life, and thereby in the creation of their psychological contracts. This becomes evident in the interview with Cayden, where he expresses an ambivalent, yet reflected opinion to AI: “*I think the biggest threat, if you can even call it that - I don’t think it is - is AI*” (Appendix 1, l. 174-175). At the same time, he emphasises that human communication has qualities that are irreplaceable by technology (Appendix 1, l. 175-76). In regard to his psychological contract, these statements point towards a desire to work in a technologically updated organisation without, however, losing the human element that contributes to remaining authentic and meaningful.

This balance between technological development and human relationality once again aligns with the Workmonitor’s findings of the importance of career development opportunities. In regard to

this, 42% of Generation Z respondents state that they would quit a job that does not offer the opportunity to develop their skills amongst others in AI (Randstad 2015, 7). Furthermore, the report states that only 40% trust their employer to invest in continuous skilling in the area of technology and AI (Randstad 2025, 34). This statistic constitutes a risk of violation of the psychological contract, especially if the expectations of professional development and technological competence are not fulfilled. This is further supported by the Workmonitor's conclusion that AI training is the most sought-after competence amongst respondents with a score of 40% (Randstad 2025, 33), which indicates that technological advancement is an integrated part of work expectations.

Maria proceeds to confirm this as she expresses her curiosity on the topic: *"I am very interested to see what role AI is going to play in this because what you now have is this tool..."* (Appendix 2, l. 153-154). This once again proves AI to be an inevitable part of the future of recruitment and work life, and thereby something organisations can benefit from incorporating in their employer branding. Additionally, the statement *"You've got all the bots out there talking..."* (Appendix 2, l. 163) shows that AI already plays an active role in the touchpoint between Randstad and its candidates, and thereby in the early creation of psychological contracts.

If organisations communicate technological professionalism without matching this with human interaction and actual competence development, they risk evoking a perception in the employee of a contract violation. Taking into consideration the statistics mentioned above of how many people are willing to leave a job if not provided sufficient skilling opportunities, these reinforce the exit response type. Moreover, it becomes clear that futureproofing is a key element in the psychological contract, leading back to the sub-theme of job security. By this, it is essential that employers both communicate about technological opportunities in a realistic manner, as well as follow up with more tangible offers of upskilling in order for the psychological contract to remain intact.

In summary, the theme of technology shows that technological development, especially in regard to AI and digitalisation, is a central element in Generation Z's psychological contracts. Generation Z expects for their workplace to be updated on its technological part and to offer continuous training and upskilling of competencies. At the same time, the generation demands for authenticity and human interaction to not be overlooked in the process of automation. The generation's assessment thereby depends to a large extent on whether technology is used in a meaningful

manner and supports their professional and personal development. By this, technology is not only a tool in the workplace, but is also a key component in the psychological contract between employee and employer.

Through the thematic analysis from a psychological contract perspective, it is evident that Generation Z's psychological contracts are significantly influenced by relational expectation. Contrary to previous generations' more transactional approach, where the focus was more based on salary and stability, Generation Z appears to be a generation who values trust, authenticity and meaning in their work relations.

The theme of *Working conditions* illustrates how Generation Z desires autonomy and career progression while still prioritising job security, which reflects a complex type of contract in which both relational and transactional elements coexist, and where the balance highly depends on the perceived meaning and opportunity for development.

In the analysis of the theme *Management*, it becomes clear how psychological contracts can be violated by poor management, lack of respect and violation of expected behavioural norms. Here, Cayden's reactions are typically situated within Rousseau's framework as active and potentially destructive responses, such as exit or voice, which emphasises how sensitive the relational contract is to perceived violation or injustice.

The theme of *Values and employer branding* shows how the signals an organisation sends out, both explicitly and implicitly, have a central role in the contract formation. Generation Z to a large extent base their expectations on perceived values and a brand's authenticity, which create a high risk of contract violation in the case of disagreements between the communicated and the perceived reality.

Within the theme *Identity and preferences*, it appears that Generation Z's expectations are strongly rooted in personal integrity and identity-based alignment with their workplace's goal and culture. This means that organisations must take a stance on the deep and non-contractual expectations that are implicit to the young generation's approach to the work life.

Finally, the theme of *Technology* shows that Generation Z has high expectations of how technology is integrated in the work life. This is not only in relation to technology as a tool, but also in relation to security in a digital future and a consciousness of technology's role in maintaining human values. Psychological contracts in this area therefore concern trust in the

employer to develop and safeguard employees' technological competencies without sacrificing authenticity or workplace relationships.

Across all of the themes, the analysis shows that the creation and maintenance of psychological contract in Generation Z involves a high degree of transparency, mutuality and value-based alignment. Employers who understand this and meet these expectations thereby have larger opportunities to attract, engage and retain young talent in a rapidly changing labour market.

6.4. Randstad's employer branding in relation to Generation Z

After having placed the five themes in a psychological contract perspective, it is highly relevant to investigate how Randstad actually responds to this in its employer branding strategy. This sub-chapter once again will review the themes identified in the thematic analysis, but this time with a focus on how the themes relate to Randstad's employer branding strategy and use of employee value proposition. Whereas the previous sub-chapters have investigated Generation Z's expectations and psychological contracts, this sub-chapter has a specific focus on how the organisation's strategic communication and brand positioning succeed in meeting and accommodating these expectations, thereby influencing attraction, engagement and retention of Generation Z employees. In order to gain an even more nuanced image of Randstad's employer branding strategy in practice, selected employee reviews from the world's leading job search website Indeed (Indeed n.d.) are included in the following sub-chapter. It is important, however, to note that employee reviews consist of subjective opinions and experiences and cannot provide an objective perspective of the themes in each review.

The analysis revolves around the three main components to employee value proposition according to Barrow and Mosley, i.e., functional, emotional and higher-order benefits (Barrow and Mosley 2005, 58-59). These constitute the foundation of a differentiated and authentic employer branding strategy designed to speak to what Generation Z considers meaningful and valuable.

6.4.1. Working conditions

The first theme to be reviewed in the context of employer branding is *Working conditions* which emerged strongly in both the generational and psychological contract perspectives as a central concern for Generation Z. This theme includes aspects such as flexibility, autonomy, career progression and job security, which are all elements that Generation Z views as essential to a

meaningful work life. The following analysis explores how Randstad addresses these expectations through its employer branding efforts, drawing on data from its career site (Randstad n.d.), YouTube videos posted by the organisation (RS Group 2025), and employee reviews on Indeed (Indeed.com 2025), and interpreting these findings through Barrow and Mosley's three-component model.

The first component of Barrow and Mosley's three components to employee value proposition is functional benefits (Barrow and Mosley 2005, 58), which refers to the tangible and practical conditions of the work life, such as work environment, support from manager and opportunities for career development. From Randstad's career site, it appears that the organisation offers a wide range of benefits such as health insurance, dental insurance and 401(k) pension, as well as access to Randstad University for professional development to mention a few (Randstad 2023). These benefits support employee satisfaction and professional growth, which has proven to be especially relevant to Generation Z, who values employers who invest in professional and personal development. Especially the benefit of professional development and career progression, is something that is very evident in Randstad's employer branding. In several YouTube videos, which Randstad posts as part of its employee value proposition campaign "Together We Grow" (Appendix 2, l. 16), employees highlight how Randstad supports their professional development. In the video *Meet Laura - 'Great things are never achieved alone'*, the main character describes how the organisation has provided her an environment that enables her to grow: "*Laura appreciates all the mentors and support that helped shape her journey*" (RS Group 2025, 1.51-1.55). This, she continues to emphasise by stating that "*Randstad understood my potential more than me*" (RS Group 2025, 2.00-2.05). These statements create the image of an organisation that cares about and helps identify its employees' potential and contributes to their professional development. This supports Cayden's statements regarding the importance of career development and the desire for progression. Also, the video *Introducing Randstad's employee value proposition - Together we grow* reflects this notion, where an employee states that "*We started together as consultants [...] and then we became regional managers*" (RS group 2025, 1.50-1.58).

These statements, however, become rather nuanced when investigating employee reviews from Indeed. One review highlights that employees have "*good opportunities to grow*" (Indeed 2025). From this review, Randstad is presented as a supportive platform for younger employees to begin and grow their careers. Another review, on the other hand states that "*I never felt I could move*

laterally or vertically” (Indeed 2025), which points towards a gap in the expected and actual opportunities for growth. This further emphasises the importance that Randstad not only communicates attractive benefits, but also ensures that these benefits are consistently implemented.

The next component of Barrow and Mosley’s three components is emotional benefits (Barrow and Mosley 2005, 58), which refers to the feeling of acknowledgement, psychological security and sense of belonging. In the video *Growth is a journey - Jaya’s story* (RS Group 2025), the main character Jaya talks about how her manager reacted with honesty and support, when she expressed insecurity in her own abilities: “*You may not be everything the job needs you to be today, but you are going to grow into it*” (RS Group 2025, 0.17-0.37), and continues to state that “*They had the patience and the faith in me*” (RS Group 2025, 0.40-0.43). This is an indication of a culture where employees are seen and supported, which aligns well with the previous reviews of the theme that Generation Z’s expectations to be met with authenticity. The experience of emotional support is also found in reviews on Indeed, where one review states that Randstad has a “*nice work culture, great team, good management, average pay, good opportunities for growth*” (Indeed 2025). However, other reviews point to different opinions, as another review describes the work environment as influenced by lack of communication and emotional tolls: “*a lot of pressure and stress*” (Indeed 2025). These statements point towards a misalignment between the emotional employer value proposition and the employees’ actual experiences, which arguably constitutes a threat to employee engagement and retention.

The last component is higher-order benefits, which refers to the goals and community the employee experiences in their work (Barrow and Mosley 2005, 59). In the video *Introducing Randstad’s employee value proposition - Together we grow*, Randstad communicates a clear collective goal: “*It takes 40,000 entrepreneurial colleagues to put 2 million people to work every year, but only one company, where we all share the same mission*” (RS Group 2025, 2.21-2.23). The message communicates a strong sense of belonging and shared identity, where employees are viewed as a part of something bigger. In this regard, the employee value proposition is also connected to a societal meaning which can be especially appealing to young people who wish to identify with an organisation’s values. Another employee in the video describes the goal “*to be the most equitable and specialized talent company*” as “*very inspiring for me*” (RS Group 2025, 2.04-

2.08), which further emphasises the desire to connect the daily practice of work to values of equity and specialisation.

This value-based positioning aligns with Cayden's implicit expectation that his workplace offers direction, progression and goals, which becomes evident in his statement that he is at the beginning of his career and that he has a desire to climb (Appendix 1, l. 163-164).

At the same time, reviews from Indeed show that experiences of higher-order benefits vary. This gives an indication of a potential gap in the organisation's employer brand, where the difference between the communicated goal and the perceived reality risks causing a violation of the psychological contract.

Reviewing the theme of *Working conditions* in an employer branding perspective shows that Randstad does seek to accommodate Generation Z's expectations of working conditions through functional, emotional and higher-order benefits. The organisation clearly communicates its proposition of growth and values, and these messages are supported by branding materials and on the organisation's career website. Yet, reviews on Indeed show that the actual experience of these benefits vary significantly, with inconsistency in the experience of development opportunities.

6.4.2. Management

The second theme to review in an employer branding context is *Management*. Management constitutes a key element in Generation Z's expectations of the labour market. This is not only as a practical management function, but as a crucial component in the experience of trust, respect and psychological security. Through the interview analysis, it becomes clear that the respondent's expectation of mutual trust (Appendix 1, l. 336-339) and low tolerance for unethical managerial behaviour (Appendix 1, l. 379-380) position leadership as a central factor in both the generational stance and the psychological contract. This corresponds to Randstad's Workmonitor's find that 49% of Generation Z respondents have quit a job due to a toxic workspace (Randstad 2025, 23). This highlights the dual role of leadership as a communicator of the employee value proposition and as a potential source of risk when the psychological contract is violated.

Functional benefits in relation to management consist of the structural and processual frameworks that make effective management possible. On Randstad's website, the management is presented as '*insightful and accomplished*' (Randstad 2025), and additionally the organisation brands itself on offering '*best-in-class training*' and '*career progression*' (Randstad 2025), which

signals that management in Randstad is not only about control, but also about promoting growth and development in employees. Once again, the employee value proposition video *Meet Laura - 'Great things are never achieved alone'* supports this. The statements in the video of Laura's appreciation of her mentors and her growth journey (RS Group, 1.51-1.55 [...] 2.00-2.05) are not only a reflection of the career development opportunities offered by Randstad, but perhaps even more so a statement that highlights the important role that management has to employees, and in this particular case, management becomes a synonym to guidance and understanding of potential. This is also confirmed through reviews on Indeed, where one review highlights "*good management*" (Indeed 2025). However, the positive image of the management is also challenged by other reviews that read "*Good money, horrible support from the leads and supervisors*" (Indeed 2025). This indicates that the functional employee value proposition regarding management is not necessarily fulfilled consistently across the organisation.

Emotional benefits, in relation to management, refer to the feelings and relations that management provokes in employees. In the video *Growth is a journey - Jaya's story*, Jaya tells a vulnerable anecdote of her seeking advice from her manager, as she had doubts of her own abilities, after which the manager encouraged her that she would grow into the role over time (RS Group 2025, 0.17-0.37). This form of emotional support and honest communication contribute to psychological security and the perception of respect, which are both central aspects in Rousseau's theory of relational contracts, while it also aligns with Twenge's characteristic of Generation Z's work values.

In addition to this, Indeed reviews show that the absence of respectful management creates an emotional distance, which is evident from a reviewer's experience of "*toxic workplace*" and "*no support*" (Indeed 2025), which indicates a violation of the expectation of mutual recognition. Cayden further highlights that he has left a job due to poor management, where a manager spoke ill of another colleague (Appendix 1, l. 379-380). Once again, this is a testament that lack of proper management will activate the exit response in employees, supporting the emotional importance of management in regard to retention and well-being.

Higher-order benefits in relation to management refer to how management contributes to the experience of purpose, development and common values. In the video *Introducing Randstad's Employee Value Proposition - Together We Grow*, an employee tells how both he and a colleague advanced from consultants to regional managers (RS Group 2025, 1.50-1.58), which demonstrates

not only internal mobility, but also trust and long-term investment in employees on Randstad's part. Another statement from the video that "*It's a really transparent, flexible culture. Everyone can talk really openly*" (RS Group 2025 1.35-1.40) shows that the management fosters an open and value-based culture.

Yet some reviews on Indeed show that this value foundation does not always come across as authentic. A former employee states that "*This was once a great company, but now [...] unwilling to adapt and micromanage EVERYTHING*" (Indeed 2025), which indicates that the management's ability to practice Randstad's goals and values are crucial to maintaining the authenticity of the employer brand, as well as to ensure that employees continue to experience a sense of value-based grounding in their work.

The review of the theme *Management* shows that Randstad in its employer brand communicates an image of its management as supportive, honest and having a growth mindset, which are all values that align with Generation Z's expectations of trust, respect and psychological security. This is further supported by Randstad's employee value proposition videos and its career site. However, reviews on Indeed show that the actual perception of the management varies, and especially lack of support and unethical behaviour can be perceived as a violation of the psychological contract, which may lead to an exit response. To ensure the authenticity of the organisation's employer brand, Randstad may benefit from strengthening the implementation of its leadership values in practice.

6.4.3. Values and employer branding

The theme of *Values and employer branding* revolves around Generation Z's demand for authenticity, transparency and value alignment between the individual and the organisation. Through the previous reviews of the theme, it has become clear that Cayden has high expectations of his future employer's moral and ethical standpoint, and that honesty even if it may not be "*super pretty*" (Appendix 1, l. 272) is appreciated over a polished brand.

In terms of values and employer branding, the functional benefits cover the tangible information and structures that are communicated in Randstad's values. On its website, the organisation lists its values as *to know to serve, to trust, striving for perfection* and *simultaneous promotion of all interests* (Randstad 2025). Through this, Randstad's employer branding is presented as a structured tool to create alignment between the organisation's actions and the values

that are expressed. The practical embodiment of these values is illustrated in the branding video *Meet Laura - 'Great things are never achieved alone'*, where it becomes clear how Randstad supports values of trust and development in concrete processes. In the video, Laura tells that “*Randstad understood my potential more than me*” (RS Group 2025, 2.00-2.05), which can be interpreted as the organisation’s value *to serve* being translated into concrete support and career development opportunities, and not simply as a promise, but as a perceived structure in the work life. Additionally, her emphasis on support can be interpreted as a proof that values of empathy and a people-first approach is implemented in Randstad’s daily management and HR strategies. However, employee reviews on Indeed reveal that the values are not always experienced in practice. A review states that Randstad “*was once a great company*” (Indeed 2025), which indicates that the organisation does not live up to the brand it used to have, pointing towards a functional misalignment between the employer brand and the organisation’s actions. This experience suggests that the values are not always embedded in the structural frameworks and leadership practices throughout the organisation.

In regard to emotional benefits in Randstad’s employer branding, these are reflected amongst others in the video *Growth is a journey - Jaya’s story*, where Jaya talks about her manager’s ability to show patience, trust and honest feedback even in times of self-doubt (RS Group, 0.40-0.43). This fosters a sense of emotional cohesion, where Randstad’s values become more than just slogans, but are actually embodied through behaviour. In the video *Introducing Randstad’s employee value proposition - Together we grow* it is explicitly expressed that “*everyone can talk really openly*” (RS Group 2025, 1.35-1.40), and by this, the value of openness is communicated as an aspect that affects and is practiced across the entire organisation. However, just as with the functional benefits, certain reviewers on Indeed testify that they have not experienced the same authenticity. In one review, it appears that the work environment has been influenced by distance and lack of engagement as it is described as a “*a lot of pressure and stress*” (Indeed 2025). Here, it is clear that the values are not perceived as emotionally rooted but as standardised communication that does not match the experience in practice.

Higher-order benefits refer to the employees’ experience of purpose, identity and opportunity to work in alignment with their personal values. Here, Randstad is very explicit in its employer branding, which is for instance seen in the *Introducing Randstad’s employee value proposition - Together we grow* video, in which it is described as inspiring to be part of “*the most*

equitable and specialized talent company” (RS Group 2025, 2.04-2.08), and moreover, it is highlighted that the organisation helps millions of people to find employment on a global scale. This connects the individual employee’s effort to a larger purpose. This is also highlighted in Randstad’s Workmonitor, which shows that 43% of Generation Z value contributing to society more than receiving a high salary (Randstad 2025, 21).

Furthermore, in her interview, Maria emphasises the importance of value-cohesion in employer branding, as she states that “*whatever it is that we offer, make sure that aligns with whatever generation it is*” (Appendix 2, l. 117-118). This reflects a strategic awareness that employer branding must be grounded in genuine value rather than mere branding techniques, and at the same time, it can be interpreted as an attempt to avoid violation of the psychological contracts by involving employees in value based initiatives: “*Tell us why, and if it aligns with the foundation, we will work with it*” (Appendix 2, l. 128-129).

The review of the third theme of *Values and employer branding* shows that Randstad strategically communicates strong values such as equity, growth and social responsibility, which aligns well with Generation Z’s focus on authenticity and moral integrity. Through the organisation’s employee value proposition videos and its career site, the values are communicated both functionally and emotionally. However, employee reviews show that there might be a gap between the banded values and the perceived reality. The perception of empty promises and lack of transparency can lead to the undermining of Randstad’s authenticity, which is a testament that values ought not simply be communicated but also experienced and rooted in practice.

6.4.4. Generation Z’s identity and preferences

In continuation of the third theme, which focused on Randstad’s values and how these are communicated externally, the fourth theme *Generation Z’s identity and preferences* focuses on the employee perspective in employer branding.

Throughout the previous reviews of the theme, it is evident that Generation Z’s relation to the labour market is deeply influenced by identity, authenticity and value alignment. As it appears in the interview data, it is important to Cayden to be able to interpret authentic signals of an employer’s culture and values, and he reacts strongly to branding that appears superficial or dishonest: “*If you think for even a second and something seems off, then it probably is*” (Appendix

1, l. 282). This aligns with Rousseau's point that psychological contracts to a large extent are shaped by informal signals and a subjective interpretation (Rousseau 1995).

Functional benefits related to Generation Z's identity and preferences concern how structures and information create transparency and a sense of influence. On Randstad's career site, the organisation has included several short videos of employee testimonials about why they enjoy working for Randstad, and the videos present a culture of being inclusive, transparent and flexible (Randstad 2025), and in addition to this, the organisation emphasises the employee's opportunities for upskilling. These are all messages that support Generation Z's demand for authenticity and personal development. This is also reflected in the video *Introducing Randstad's employee value proposition - Together we grow* where employees talk about the opportunity to actively contribute and be heard: "*We have space to propose new things*" (RS Group 2025, 1.41-1.43). This is a reflection of functional frames of engagement and identity development, which is precisely what Cayden highlights when stating, "*if you don't like the message, you're going to be miserable*" (Appendix 1, l. 115-116).

The emotional benefits in this theme regard the experience of being met as a unique individual and having one's values and identity acknowledged on an emotional level. This level of emotional benefit is clear in the video *Growth is a journey - Jaya's story*, where she shares how her manager acknowledged her insecurities and responded to her that "*You may not be everything the job needs you to be today, but you are going to grow into it*" (RS Group 2025, 0.17-0.37). This reflects a leadership style influenced by empathy and trust which is something that is also appreciated by Cayden (Appendix 1, l. 338).

Yet, once again, the reviews on Indeed show that not everyone experiences the same level of emotional engagement, which is evident in a review that finds it stressful "*not knowing if your supervisors were going to be hot or cold any given day*" (Indeed 2025). This emotional violation undermines the relational psychological contract, which is central to Generation Z.

In regard to higher-order benefits in the theme of Generation Z's identity and preferences, these refer to the generation's demand to feel aligned with the purpose and identity of their workplace. In the videos *Meet Laura - 'Great things are never achieved alone'* and *Introducing Randstad's employee value proposition - Together we grow*, the employees' growth journey and work effort are connected to Randstad's overall mission to employ people. The closing slogan of the *Introducing Randstad's employee value proposition - Together we grow* video emphasises this

collective goal by stating that it only takes “*one company where we all share the same mission*” (RS Group 2025, 2.21-2.23). This reflects a workplace in which identity is formed not solely on an individual level, but through shared experiences and collective meaning-making.

The Randstad respondent Maria also confirms this in her statement that Randstad’s offers must align with the generations (Appendix 2, l. 117-118). By this, employer branding becomes a strategic tool to ensure a sense of identification and to avoid a violation of value-based trust.

The review of this theme once again shows that Generation Z has a strong demand for authenticity, value alignment and the opportunity to express their identity in their work. Randstad actively communicates messages of flexibility, growth and common purpose, which appeals to Generation Z’s preferences. However, reviews on Indeed show that the promises of the employer brand are not always perceived as authentic, which can lead to a violation of the psychological contract.

6.4.5. Technology

The fifth and final theme to be reviewed in regard to Randstad’s employer branding strategy is the theme of *Technology*. From the previous reviews of the theme, it is clear that technology constitutes a dual expectation for Generation Z. On the one hand, the digital native generation expects access to new technology as well as the option of continuous upskilling, and on the other hand, there is a clear demand for balance so that the human dimension of the work does not disappear. In the interview with Cayden, he expressed that AI is “*the biggest threat*” (Appendix 1, l. 175), followed by a rejection that human communication can be replaced by technology (Appendix 1, l. 175-176). This shows that the understanding of technology and digital maturity is a natural part of Generation Z’s identity and psychological contract, but only if the technology serves a meaningful purpose and supports growth.

In regard to the functional benefits within this theme, these refer to whether Randstad offers updated technology and access to digital competency development. From Randstad’s career site, it appears that employees are offered access to ‘*best-in-class training*’, which consist of upskilling via internal platforms such as Randstad University (Randstad 2025). This matches Generation Z’s demand for future-proofing and digital competencies, which is a need that, according to the Workmonitor, is such a central aspect that 42% of young employees would consider leaving a job if it did not offer technological upskilling (Randstad 2025, 7).

The video *Introducing Randstad's employee value proposition - Together we grow* also visualises this ambition through the statement that Randstad is a “*transparent, flexible culture*” (RS Group 2025, 1.35-1.40), in which technology functions as an underlying precondition for flexibility.

Emotional benefits in regard to the theme concern how technology affects the employees' emotional perception of the work environment, and if the technology supports or disrupts the perception of engagement and human contact. In the interview with Cayden, he expresses a clear preference of human communication as opposed to automated communication in his statement that “*you can't really recreate that [human connection] with a machine*” (Appendix 1, l. 175-175). This shows that technological development is appreciated only if it supports relational aspects of the work life rather than replacing it, and this balance between digitalisation and human closeness is crucial to how Generation Z perceives the employer's authenticity and connection.

The video *Meet Laura - 'Great things are never achieved alone'* illustrates this focus, as Laura highlights the mentors and support that have shaped her journey (RS Group, 1.51-1.55), although this is not a result of digital tools, but rather of personal support and human relations. This emotional gain in her story is rooted in trust, recognition and personal guidance, which confirm that technology in itself does not create emotional benefits like proper management and a supportive environment.

In regard to the higher-order benefits of this theme, these refer to whether technological development supports the employee's experience of purpose, futureproofing and identity. Randstad's branding positions technological professionalism as part of the organisation's mission. In *Introducing Randstad's employee value proposition - Together we grow* it is mentioned that 40,000 employees work together to employ 2 million people on a global scale (RS Group 2025, 2.21-2.23), which indicates the need for advanced technology to support the logistics of the worldwide collaboration. Furthermore, from the interview with Maria it appears that technology, including AI, is already an active part of the recruitment process: “*You've got all the bots out there talking...*” (Appendix 2, l. 163). Additionally, she expresses curiosity in regard to the future role of AI (Appendix 2, l. 153-154), which reflects an organisational structure, where technology is considered strategically and long-term.

This aligns with Generation Z's demand that their work must be future-proofed and create value, and that technology ought to be used to support their development instead of merely optimising their role.

The analysis of the five themes shows that Randstad with its employer branding significantly attempts to accommodate Generation Z's expectations through a differentiated and value-based employee value proposition. Based on Barrow and Mosley three components of functional, emotional and higher-order benefits (Barrow and Mosley 2005), Randstad's employee value proposition appears to be strategically well-structured, although also characterised by certain inconsistency between the communicated brand and the perceived experience amongst employees. On the functional level, Randstad highlights central benefits such as flexible working conditions, strong development opportunities, modern technology and access to structured career progression. These messages are clearly communicated via Randstad's own career site and employer branding videos on the organisation's YouTube site, and the messages do appear to appeal to Generation Z's demands for both autonomy and futureproofing.

Employee reviews on Indeed, on the other hand, show that these communicated messages are not always fulfilled in practice. This is especially in regard to support from managers, digital structure and access to actual development. However, it is important to note that Randstad's ratings in general are above average, as the organisation scores a 3.7 out of 5 in overall satisfaction (Indeed 2025).

Emotionally, Randstad signals a work environment characterised by openness, trust, dialogue and psychological security. The employer branding videos *Growth is a journey - Jaya's story* and *Introducing Randstad's employee value proposition - Together we grow* support this through personal stories of managers who support and acknowledge their employees. But also in this regard, there are signs of inconsistency in practice, as several employees describe emotional distance, which undermines the relational contracts and weakens the employee engagement.

On a higher-order level, Randstad positions itself as a purpose driven organisation that helps employ people and supports equity, inclusion and societal contributions. This is especially attractive to Generation Z, who seeks identity and purpose in their work. However, employee reviews indicate that the organisation's values are not always experienced as being embedded in everyday practice. When promises of transparency and value alignment are not kept, Randstad risks causing a violation of psychological contracts, which can ultimately lead to exit responses among employees.

In summary, Randstad demonstrates a strong awareness of what is important to young employees today, and it is clear that the organisation attempts to integrate this in its employer branding. However, the organisation's ability to translate its employer branding into consistent employee experiences are crucial to whether Generation Z will perceive Randstad as an authentic, engaged and attractive long-term workplace.

7. Discussion

From the analysis, it is evident that Generation Z has clear and complex expectations of the labour market, including flexibility, career development opportunities, purpose and respectful management. These expectations are closely connected to the generation's social and historical location, which Mannheim describes as a shaping factor in generational consciousness (Mannheim 1952). Twenge supports this in her research by highlighting that technological and societal trends shape a generation characterised by individualism, values and a desire for purpose. Additionally, the analysis shows that Randstad in its employer branding actively seeks to accommodate these expectations, especially through value-based communication and a focus on personal and professional development. However, tensions also arise between what is externally communicated and what is experienced in practice, which makes the need for understanding employer branding as not only a tool but as a part of a broad psychological contract highly relevant.

A central find from the analysis is Generation Z's value of flexibility and autonomy. The interview with Cayden shows a desire to be able to structure his own workday and work form (Appendix 1, l. 110-112), which indicates an expectation of support of individual autonomy from management. In this regard, Randstad does communicate flexibility as a key value in its employee value proposition material (Appendix 3), and this raises the question of the extent to which the organisation's internal practice is able to keep this promise. Here, there is an interesting tension between the strategic and the operational level of employer branding, as to what extent branding functions as a genuine creator of expectations, and when it instead becomes a polished facade that does not necessarily reflect the realities of the work life.

According to Rousseau, violations of psychological contracts may occur when employer branding and practice do not correlate, and this perspective is crucial to consider when assessing the importance of branding in relation to Generation Z's expectations.

When it comes to management, the importance of trust, respect and transparency additionally becomes clear. Here, Cayden's experience with a former manager who showed offensive behaviour to another colleague made him leave his job (appendix 1, l.379-380). The fact that the incident did not directly involve Cayden, but he still chose to leave the job, is a testament that poor management is not tolerated by Generation Z, as it is a direct violation of their values. This brings into focus whether employer branding implicitly communicates managerial expectations that prove crucial to young people's experience of the psychological contract. In this regard, it can be argued whether organisations such as Randstad sufficiently incorporate leadership development as part of their brand, or if there continues to be a gap between vision and reality. Randstad's Workmonitor from 2025 shows that a large number of Generation Z individuals would quit if they experienced that their manager acts unethically or does not respect employees (Randstad 2025, 11). Thereby, the question remains whether such statistics point towards a foundational shift in how management ought to be conceived in relation to employer branding.

An additional key aspect concerns the relationship between organisational values and employee identification. Cayden emphasises a wish for alignment between his own and his workplace's values by stating that he does not "*want to be anywhere evil*" (appendix 1, l. 114). Randstad equally emphasises value-based work in its branding strategy, but once again, a dilemma arises as to how authentic an organisation appears when its employee value proposition is targeted at different target groups and is constantly reshaped, as Maria suggests in her statement that "*whatever it is that we offer, make sure that aligns with whatever generation it is*" (appendix 2, l. 117-118). The flexibility of the branding allows for the creation of relevance, yet it may also pose the risk of unclarity, and in that case, it may be questioned whether the employee value proposition loses its role as a unifying core and instead becomes a fluid tool lacking in substance. The analysis thus prompts reflection on whether differentiated employer branding risks undermining the very qualities Generation Z is looking for: authenticity and consistency.

Additionally, the analysis indicates that Generation Z is far from a homogeneous group, as there are both individual and cultural variations in how values and preferences are prioritised. This confirms Mannheim and Twenge's point that generations are to be understood and perceived as socially constructed and internally differentiated. Furthermore, it requires organisations to create branding material that both embraces common values as well as encompasses the flexibility to

meet diverse needs. Balancing this poses a challenge, as it risks resulting in communication that becomes overly fragmented or lacks clarity.

A solution to this can be to include employees actively in the employer branding development, which is an initiative that Randstad does appear to incorporate into its practice: *“Tell us why and if it aligns with the direction of the foundation that is something that we will continue to start to do some work with”* (appendix 2, l. 128-129). However, this initiative can also be resource-intensive and structurally demanding, and ought to thereby be considered carefully.

Moreover, the analysis shows that employer branding has the potential to bridge the gap between organisations and future employees, however, only to the extent that is rooted in genuine organisational practice. If the brand alone is used as a strategic communication tool without corresponding internal structures and culture, it may lead to violation of the psychological contract, disappointment in employees and ultimately loss of talent. This problem becomes evident in the interview with Cayden, as he expresses frustration over what he perceives as superficial communication and calls for a more genuine inclusion of employees in shaping the organisation’s value foundation (Appendix 1, l. 412-413). Such a demand suggests that employer branding may increasingly need to be understood as an organisational practice, that both reflects and influences the organisation’s culture, management and relationships, rather than a standalone branding product.

Based on this, it is relevant to consider how Randstad in practice can strengthen its employer brand even more. A natural direction may be to increase the extent of employee involvement in the development of the organisation’s employee value proposition. This is due to the fact that the analysis finds that Generation Z values authenticity and involvement highly, and thereby an even more involving approach can strengthen the perception of ownership and the authenticity of the employer brand. This, however, requires that feedback and input from employees are not only collected, but also integrated in the strategic development. Additionally, Randstad may beneficially work to strengthen the link between the employee value proposition and the actual experienced practice within the organisation. It remains crucial to consider whether organisational managers are adequately prepared to translate the employee value proposition’s values into everyday practice, and whether there are existing structures that make it possible to measure and adjust this alignment.

Another central point of reflection is connected to the communication of the employee value proposition. Randstad emphasises that the brand is tailored to accommodate different target groups (Appendix 2, l. 117-118), but this requires strategic consideration, so that differentiation does not compromise the core of the brand. Here, it may be considered if the development of segmented employee value propositions – for instance targeting graduates, specialists or remote workers – can strengthen the relevance without compromising the authenticity. In relation to this, it is necessary to create more transparency around what the overall values mean in practice. If flexibility for instance is communicated as a core value, it must be clarified how it is manifested in different types of positions and organisational contexts. This way, unrealistic expectations can be avoided, and the risk of contract violation can be reduced.

Finally, the analysis points towards a need for ongoing follow-up and evaluation of the employer branding efforts. A dynamic effort, where the employer brand's effect and the reception are regularly evaluated may contribute to ensuring that the branding strategy is continuously developed along with employees' needs and experiences. A concrete way of doing so, can be through employee surveys. This enables the organisation to align the externally communicated brand with internal realities more effectively, enhancing the perceived coherence and credibility.

Collectively, this reflection indicates that an effective employer branding strategy ought not only reflect the preferences of Generation Z but ought also to be embedded in practice to be perceived as authentic. Additionally, the employer brand will benefit from being developed through involvement of the people it is meant to engage – the employees. It is within this dynamic between expectations, lived experience, and employee involvement, employer branding emerges as a strategic instrument with real potential for recruitment, retention, and organisational culture development.

8. Conclusion

This thesis has investigated how Generation Z's expectations and preferences to the labour market is reflected in Randstad's employer branding strategy. By combining generational theory, psychological contract theory, and employer branding with qualitative interviews and analysis of Randstad's Workmonitor 2025, the study identifies both alignments and tensions between what Generation Z seeks and what Randstad communicates and offers.

The analysis shows that Generation Z highly demands flexibility, autonomy, value alignment, purpose and career development opportunities in their work life. These expectations spring from sociocultural and historical conditions such as digital upbringing, financial insecurity and a generally increased consciousness of social and ethical questions. Especially Twenge emphasises that Generation Z shows higher levels of mental vulnerability than earlier generations, and therefore has a demand for workplaces to offer well-being and psychological security.

In the light of these expectations, Randstad has formulated the employee value proposition *Together We Grow*, which seeks to accommodate the generation through messages of community, development and diversity. Randstad's employer branding strategy is thus strategically tailored to the target group, and the interview with the Randstad respondent Maria shows a clear insight to the necessity of working in a differentiated and target group-oriented manner. Additionally, the strategy is supported by internal and external communication initiatives that aim to signal authenticity and a value-based foundation.

However, potential tensions also emerge between the communicated brand and employees' lived experiences in practice. Here, employee reviews have a central part, as they have the ability to provide access to current and former employees' own evaluation of whether the employer branding is being fulfilled in the daily organisational practice. In many cases, the reviews of Randstad confirm the strengths of the organisation's employer brand, including a positive work culture, flexibility, and opportunities for career development. However, criticism of management and unclear expectation also occurs in some reviews, which can indicate a violation of the psychological contracts – especially in the light of Generation Z's low tolerance to misalignment between values and practice. Thereby, employee reviews contribute to the nuancing of the thesis' finds by documenting how employer branding is not only evaluated externally, but also internally from the employees who have direct experience with the workplace. By this, employer branding can beneficially be viewed as a two-sided phenomenon: partly an external strategy to attract talent, and partly as an internal practice to be perceived as genuine and meaningful by existing employees. To Generation Z who seek social evidence and peer feedback, platforms like Indeed not only become sources of information, but central guiding marks in the evaluation of whether a brand lives up to its promises.

In conclusion, Randstad's employer branding to a large extent does reflect Generation Z's core values, especially in regard to flexibility, personal and professional development and

community-oriented communication. Additionally, the findings from the analysis emphasises that a successful employer brand requires a strong connection to practice, and that authentic brand experience is just as important as the messages in the strategic communication.

Finally, the thesis highlights the importance of organisations consistently integrating internal data and employee-generated feedback into the ongoing development of employer branding strategies. This way, organisations like Randstad can ensure that their branding strategies remain relevant, authentic and tailored to the generations they wish to engage.

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Reflection paper

Since the beginning of my academic journey in the fall of 2019, I have experienced tremendous progression on an academic, personal and relational level. This reflection paper explores the academic and personal growth that I have undergone during my time at Aalborg University.

Problem oriented competencies

With a basis in problem-based learning, my time at Aalborg University has provided me with competencies and abilities to critically assess problems, and work with these through analytical and reflective approaches. From my very first academic paper in the first semester to the writing of this master's thesis, I have continuously developed my ability to navigate methodological approaches to data collection and analysis, as well as theoretical frameworks, and to carefully select those most appropriate for answering my research questions. This includes the ability to identify and formulate relevant problem statements with a foundation in real-life issues, to which my academic work has the opportunity to contribute to improvements and solutions.

Interpersonal competencies

Additionally, the approach of problem-based learning has strengthened my interpersonal competencies in the sense that most of my work at Aalborg University has been conducted through group work. From this, I have gained competencies in working in teams where it is essential to be able to constructively listen to each other, acknowledge and use each other's areas of competency to optimise the outcome of the work. This has improved my ability to balance my own ambition and the demands of collaboration. Moreover, my interpersonal competencies have been further developed through external collaboration.

Furthermore, I have had the opportunity to collaborate with external organisations during my education. From this, I have gained an insight to different fields and the different people within them, and I have learned to adjust my communication accordingly. These are also abilities on which I draw on a daily basis and understand the importance of.

Structural competencies

As regards my structural competencies, my experience in long term project work has significantly enhanced my ability to plan and structure tasks effectively. In a group context, I have learned to

meet internal deadlines as an integral part of collaboration. This is both out of respect for shared agreements, and from a clear understanding of my individual responsibility in a collaborative process. I have become increasingly aware of how delays in my own work can impact the group's overall progress and ultimately affect the quality of the final outcome.

However, my structural development is not limited to group work. Through individual project work, including my thesis, I have cultivated a strong sense of self-discipline and the ability to maintain structure over extended periods of time. This progression has been crucial in managing the various phases of the project and ensuring consistent momentum.

These competencies are transferable to professional contexts, where I am fully aware that my work, both directly and indirectly, can influence the workflow and productivity of my colleagues.

Metacognitive competencies

Overall, my time at Aalborg University has strengthened my ability to reflect on and assess my own work as a student and communicator. I have developed a stronger consciousness of how I work analytically and creatively in the best way possible, for instance by combining thorough theoretical work with tangible examples from practice. My time as a student has taught me to work critically with my own assumptions and hypotheses, and I have practiced my abilities to think holistically of how theories, methods, empiricism and communication are all connected and contribute to an academic foundation.

From this metacognitive consciousness, I have developed a clear image of how to apply my competencies in my future work.