Increasing Global Reach: Using Social Network Sites for Employer Branding

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ABSTRACT

Employer branding by means of Social Network Sites (SNS) has been inspired by two recent developments: the increase of user-generated content with the spread of Web 2.0 and the lack of specialized human resources. However, this phenomenon is yet not very well understood: Which companies use SNS for employer branding? What are the motivations behind it and what are the necessary success strategies? In this paper, we uncover main goals companies pursue, strategies that are employed and the possible benefits that can be attained with an SNS presence. Our results are based on an evaluation of a quantitative survey and a qualitative analysis of interviews with company representatives. We find that, if an SNS presence is established strategically, companies can increase their global reach, improve employer brand awareness, achieve positive user bonding, gather valuable feedback as well as recruit for vacant positions.

Keywords

Social network sites, employer branding, recruitment

1. INTRODUCTION

Social Network Sites (SNS) became a mass phenomenon in 2005 when Facebook (FB) opened up to people outside the university network [6]. Today, FB claims to have over 500 million active users worldwide [8], making it the largest SNS. Its global orientation as well as heterogenous forms of use in private and professional contexts, make it a promising platform for companies and potential employees. The widespread usage of private SNS in a professional context began when FB users eventually launched their careers and started to add professional contacts [18]. On a B2B-level, however, there is still no globally used SNS. Instead, purely professional SNS have evolved within certain geographical boundaries: most of LinkedIn's 75 million members are located in English-speaking countries [12], whereas Xing is mainly popular in German-speaking countries [26].

Nowadays, companies are intensively using SNS for company branding and product branding [17]. However, only very few companies seem to apply SNS for employer branding, a term coined by Ambler and Barrow [2] and later completed by Barrow and Mosly [4]. They define employer branding as "… the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the employing company". Whereas company branding and product branding are usually realized by marketing departments, HR departments are in charge of employer branding. As these departments usually pursue different goals, they each require a separate SNS presence. The main role of employer branding is to " […] improve recruitment, retention and commitment" [4]. With the raging *war for talents* [16], characterized by the increasing lack of specialized workforce in advanced economies, it is becoming more important for companies to distinguish themselves and portray themselves as attractive employers in order to attract new talents and retain existing ones. Yet, the potential of employer branding via SNS is not fully exploited and needs to be further explored.

Therefore, the study at hand aims at investigating the state of deployment of SNS for employer branding by companies, and uncovering the specific goals and success strategies for building up an SNS presence. For these purposes, we analyzed a survey conducted by *squeaker.net* (an SNS specialized in online recruiting) concerning the adoption of SNS by companies, graduates and students. In order to gain deeper insights into motivations, we conducted eight interviews with professionals who carry recruiting responsibility in a major German company. Application of grounded theory to the gathered qualitative data resulted in the formulation of a conceptual framework of employer branding via SNS.

2. BACKGROUND AND RELATED WORK

Among the many existing definitions of SNS, the most suitable one for our purposes is the definition by Boyd and Ellison [6]. According to them, SNS are '*web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system*.' This means that SNS belong to the so-called "social media" applications. While the contacts to other users are essential for all SNS, other social media applications (e.g. video-platforms such as YouTube and online social games) concentrate on content and entertainment [9].

The functionalities of SNS and their user base vary considerably. The user's network can consist of friends and contacts via bi-directional confirmations, or of fans and followers via uni-directional confirmations, depending on the SNS respectively the type of account [5]. SNS generally support the maintenance of pre-existing social networks, whereas some even help strangers to connect. Communities are normally based on common interests, or on shared racial, sexual, cultural or other identities [6].

Professional SNS generally also provide a template to insert the user's CV, but mostly neglect personal preferences such as hobbies and favorite movies. A main feature of most SNS is the visualization of the user's direct connections to other users. This allows a user to approach strangers through a mutual acquaintance, a functionality that is particularly useful for recruiters [18]. However, professional networks are generally not suitable for students, since users have to give their current position and industry (ibid.).

Most research on the adoption of SNS is focused on private use, notably on issues such as the formation of *social capital*, a broad term reflecting the value arising from individual's relationships with others [7]. Its sub-category, the so-called B*ridging social capital* refers to potential benefits resulting from loose connections between heterogenous individuals, such as enhanced access to a broader set of material resources and exchange of useful information (ibid.). Applied to our context, increased interaction in SNS between companies and applicants may build up bridging social capital with potential benefits on both sides. The applicant can present herself to the company prior to the actual application process and obtain useful information for her application, whereas the company receives more applications from a wider range of candidates and gets a first impression of the applicants.

In the IS discipline, the influence of SNS in a professional context does not seem to be sufficiently explored. Research in this area is generally reduced to specific topics: e.g, Wirtz et al. [24] examine the implications of Web 2.0 and SNS for business models, challenges caused by privacy issues are addressed by Wang and Kobsa [22]. Some articles deal with the issue of company-internal communication via SNS, especially with interaction patterns as a signal to closeness between colleagues [25], or with the relationship between organizational social capital and the use of an internal SNS [20]. Thus the importance of the topic for IS seems to be recognized, but a comprehensive study on the goals and the impact of using SNS in a professional context is missing.

Moreover, very few articles specifically investigate employer branding and recruiting strategies of companies on SNS. Martin et al. [14], for example, deal with human resource management inside the company by means of SNS, whereas Backhaus [3] investigates the presentation of companies in online recruiting portals. Backhaus [3] finds that companies generally do not choose the information they are presenting in their online profiles carefully enough in order to attract applicants and distinguish themselves from competitors. Another important contribution is the study by Martin et al. [13], which confirms the importance of employer branding in general and discusses its impact. There are also specific studies concerning social media background checks: e.g., Kluemper and Rosen [10] confirm their usefulness for improved employment selection decisions based on the personal information of an applicant that is currently available in SNS; Skeels and Gruding [18] advise to be cautious when using information retrieved from SNS, as it may bias the selection decision. Here again we can note the increasing importance of SNS for the recruiting process.

However, no articles could be found on the specific topic of employer branding and recruiting by means of social media or more specifically by means of SNS. Our study intends to close this gap, and to contribute to IS research by conducting an exploratory study of company usage of SNS for employer branding. In order to uncover the importance of using SNS for employer branding, we aim to answer the following research questions: Why and how are companies using SNS for employer branding and recruiting? What benefits can be achieved?

3. METHODOLOGY

We used methodological triangulation to explore the adoption of SNS in employer branding (survey) and the motivations behind the usage of SNS (interviews), as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1. Methodology overview

Method	Sample	Goal	Analysis
Survey	(n= 409)	Determining adoption rate of SNS	Quantitative: descriptive statistics
Semi-structured interviews	Professionals with recruiting responsibility (n = 8)	Individual in-dept analysis	Qualitative: Grounded Theory

3.1 Survey

The invitations to take part in the survey were posted on FB, Twitter and sent via e-mail. Out of 588 participants, 409 completed all questions. The participants can be divided into three groups: students/graduates (76% of the survey participants), professionals without recruiting responsibility (11%), and professionals with recruiting responsibility (13%). The questions of the two latter groups (professionals) were slightly adapted for the first group (students/graduates). The questions concerned the adoption of SNS, social media background checks and the motivations behind the engagement on SNS. The adoption of SNS was evaluated based on the existence of at least one account in the following SNS: private SNS (FB, VZ-Networks, G Buzz), professional SNS (Xing, LinkedIn), specialised recruiting SNS (squeaker.net) or microblogging services (Twitter).

Almost all participants from the student/graduate sub-sample came from Germany, Austria or Switzerland (80%) and almost as many female (42%) as male (58%) survey participants replied. 67% of the survey participants were between 20-25 years old, 28% were between 26-30, and 5% were above 30 years old.

98% of all professionals (with or without recruiting responsibility) came from German-speaking countries; 73% were male and 27% were female. Most survey participants were between 26-30 (45%) and 31-40 (35%) years old. Only 5% of the professionals were younger than 25, and 15% were over 40 years old.

3.2 Interviews

In order to explore the company usage of SNS for employer branding, we used grounded theory due to its ability to analyze qualitative data systematically, to uncover the underlying relationships and to generate a theory based on them [21]. Our choice to use grounded theory was furthermore justified by the absence of systematic research on recruiting or employer branding via SNS. We pursued the 'Straussian' line of grounded theory, which requires an absence of an a-priori theory and emphasizes the usage of a paradigm [21]. In the process of constant comparison of emerging concepts against collected data, we inductively constructed a conceptual model of employer branding via SNS.

We conducted eight semi-structured in-depth interviews of 30 minutes with recruiters of several companies (for details, see Table 2). Because all recruiters were German native speakers, we conducted the interviews in German, as recommended by Wengraf [23]. The recruiters were asked questions such as: "*What role do SNS play for recruiting? What value can be attained by using SNS for recruiting?*". Two interviews were held with employees of companies doing social media consulting, which will be subsequently referred to as "experts" (in *italics* in Table 2).

All interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and subsequently analyzed with the software tool "atlas.ti". The analysis was carried out in three distinct stages: open, axial and selective coding.

Table 2. Interviewees

Industry sector	Number of employees	Age of company (years)	Intensity of SNS usage
consulting (tax and audit)	40 (in Germany)	> 10	low
consulting (strategy and management)	14.500 (globally)	> 50	low
media	103.000 (globally)	> 130	high
online retailing	4100 (in Germany)	> 50	medium
electronics	116.000 (globally)	> 120	medium
rail transport	240.000 (globally)	> 15	high
consulting (social media)	*10 (in Germany)*	*> 5*	*expert*
consulting (social media)	*15 (in Germany)*	*> 5*	*expert*

During open coding, categories and properties are identified by looking for patterns in the data and comparing them with each other [21]. Accordingly, we identified 58 categories in total, each possessing at least one property and respective dimensions. To illustrate the process of open coding, consider the following example from one of the interviews: "*As regards XING we want to create an account* (category: build up presence, property: social network, dimension: professional), *but have not done it yet* (category: adoption rate of SNS, property: usage, dimension: intention). *We currently use it in order to find someone in the pool* (category: looking for people, property: source, dimension: wide), *who is interesting to us as a potential employee* (category: recruiting, property: certainty of outcome, dimension: moderate)" (Q).

During axial coding, the emerging categories were grouped into families by uncovering the relationships between them. The paradigm model by Strauss and Corbin [21], which includes causal and intervening conditions, strategies and actions, as well

as consequences, served as a basis to identify these relationships. The process of selective coding allowed us to focus on the most relevant categories to describe the attitude towards employer branding via SNS. The result of our analysis, the conceptual framework (Figure 2), describes the context in which employer branding occurs on SNS.

4. RESULTS

Our interviews and our survey data confirm that companies increasingly use SNS for employer branding and recruiting. As one of the interviewees puts it: "*In comparison to the year 2000, online recruiting has become more important in our company: be it on professional networks such as XING, or on private networks such as Facebook, Twitter, …*" (Q). Our survey confirms these results: 53% of the participating companies stated that they already use SNS for employer branding and recruiting, or that they are planning to do so (see Figure 1). Xing and FB were named as the most commonly employed SNS, with adoption rates of 95% and 83%, respectively. Twitter (77%) was more popular than LinkedIn (58%), which we found quite surprising. The relatively low adoption rate of LinkedIn in comparison to Xing could be explained by the dominance of Xing in German-speaking countries, where 98% of the surveyed companies come from. At the same time, 99% of the surveyed students/graduates use at least one SNS. Whereas FB has similar adoption rates for companies and students/graduates, the adoption rates for Xing differ with 95% (professionals) and 57% (students/graduates) respectively. Here we can note that students tend to avoid using professional SNS, which is confirmed by the adoption rate of LinkedIn: whereas 58% of companies use this network, only 26% of students/graduates do. Again, the adoption rate for Twitter seems surprising: only 29% of the students/graduates report using it.
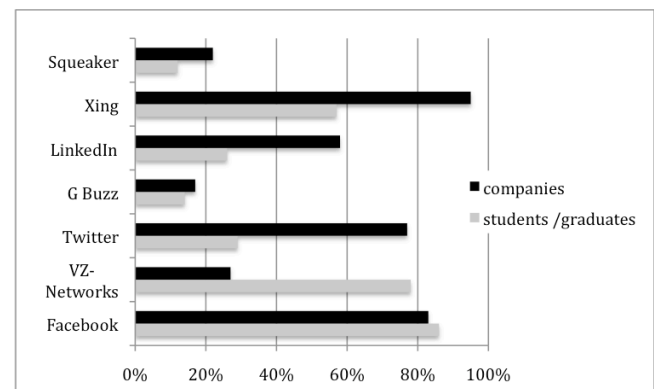

Figure 1. Adoption rate of SNS

Based on extensive qualitative data analysis, we formulate a conceptual model of employer branding and recruiting via SNS (Figure 2). The model aims to reflect the overall attitude of companies towards the adoption of SNS for employer branding and recruiting. The model differentiates between the strategic and operational *goals* that companies pursue on SNS; an *external environment* that can have an impact on the goals; the *strategies and actions* they need to undertake in order to achieve the goals; various short-term and long-term *consequences* as a result of implemented strategies; as well as *intervening conditions* that can either have an amplifying or softening effect on the strategies and/or consequences. The causal relationships (represented by the arrows in Figure 2) in the model are rather generic. They show
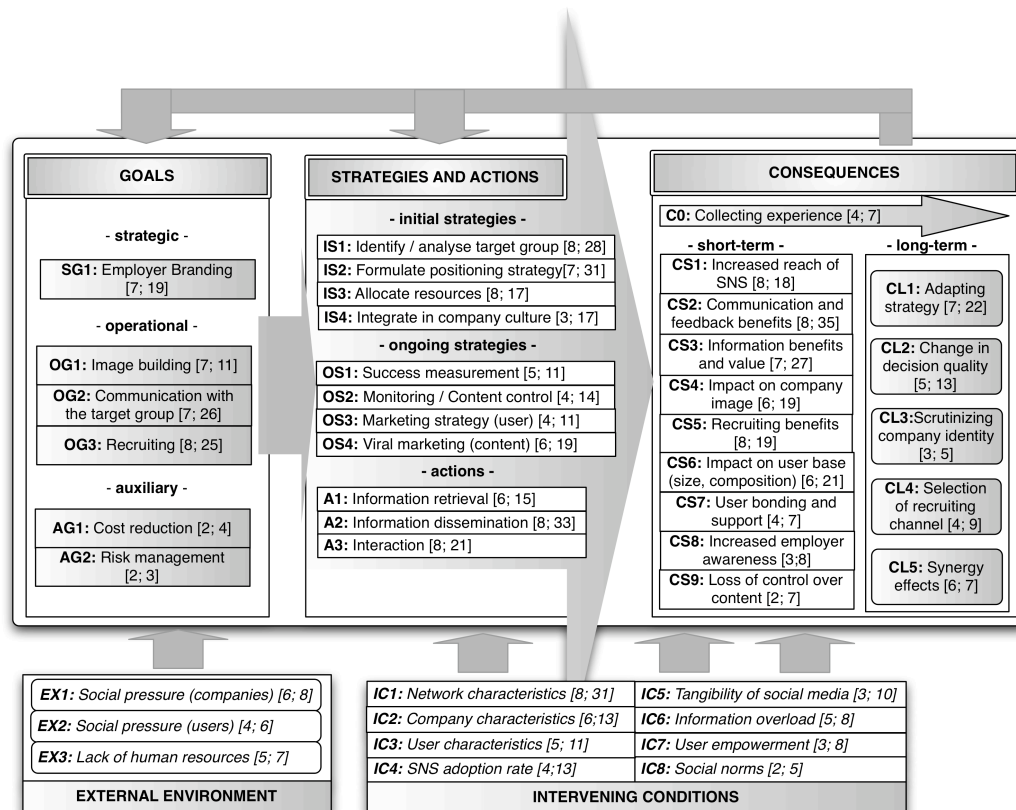
GOALS

- strategic -

SG1: Employer Branding [7; 19]

- operational -

OG1: Image building [7; 11]
OG2: Communication with the target group [7; 26]
OG3: Recruiting [8; 25]

- auxiliary -

AG1: Cost reduction [2; 4]
AG2: Risk management [2; 3]

STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS

- initial strategies -

IS1: Identify / analyse target group [8; 28]
IS2: Formulate positioning strategy [7; 31]
IS3: Allocate resources [8; 17]
IS4: Integrate in company culture [3; 17]

- ongoing strategies -

OS1: Success measurement [5; 11]
OS2: Monitoring / Content control [4; 14]
OS3: Marketing strategy (user) [4; 11]
OS4: Viral marketing (content) [6; 19]

- actions -

A1: Information retrieval [6; 15]
A2: Information dissemination [8; 33]
A3: Interaction [8; 21]

CONSEQUENCES

C0: Collecting experience [4; 7]

- short-term -

CS1: Increased reach of SNS [8; 18]
CS2: Communication and feedback benefits [8; 35]
CS3: Information benefits and value [7; 27]
CS4: Impact on company image [6; 19]
CS5: Recruiting benefits [8; 19]
CS6: Impact on user base (size, composition) [6; 21]
CS7: User bonding and support [4; 7]
CS8: Increased employer awareness [3; 8]
CS9: Loss of control over content [2; 7]

- long-term -

CL1: Adapting strategy [7; 22]
CL2: Change in decision quality [5; 13]
CL3: Scrutinizing company identity [3; 5]
CL4: Selection of recruiting channel [4; 9]
CL5: Synergy effects [6; 7]

EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

EX1: Social pressure (companies) [6; 8]
EX2: Social pressure (users) [4; 6]
EX3: Lack of human resources [5; 7]

INTERVENING CONDITIONS

IC1: Network characteristics [8; 31]
IC2: Company characteristics [6; 13]
IC3: User characteristics [5; 11]
IC4: SNS adoption rate [4; 13]
IC5: Tangibility of social media [3; 10]
IC6: Information overload [5; 8]
IC7: User empowerment [3; 8]
IC8: Social norms [2; 5]

Figure 2. Conceptual Model

that the choice of strategies depends on the aspired goals, possibly influenced by the external environment. The realization of strategies, in turn, can lead to certain consequences, which possibly can be mediated by intervening conditions. The model does not provide specific recommendations, i.e. that a certain strategy necessarily leads to a certain consequence or is carried out in response to a certain goal, but rather shows possible goal-strategy-consequence combinations. The model is circular, reflecting the adjustment behavior of companies: the adaptation of strategies in the short-term and goals in the long-term in response to certain consequences.

The relative importance of each construct in the overall model can be assessed by the number of times respondents mentioned them. The first number in square brackets next to each category in Figure 2 reflects the number of respondents mentioning this category (max. 8), whereas the second one reflects the number of times this category was mentioned in all interviews. In the following sections we describe the major components of the model (goals, strategies and actions, consequences) in detail. Intervening conditions and external environment are considered across the sections. Additionally, as we progress to describe model elements, we provide examples to illustrate the relationships between the model components. The reader can trace the model elements in the text with the help of the abbreviations deinfed in Figure 2.

Goals

Company motivations behind initiating an SNS presence differ in their strategic orientation. Employer branding is usually the overarching goal, whereas image building, communication with the target group and recruiting are subordinate goals of an SNS presence. *Employer branding* (SG1) refers to positioning oneself as an employer for a broad target group as opposed to *recruiting* (OG3) a specific candidate: *"If I say recruiting, that means I want the person XY for this or that position and contact him directly. And employer branding is to generally address a specific target group, say computer scientists, because we have a lot of positions of the kind, and to make them aware of us as an employer"* (Q). The lack of specialized workforces (EX3) intensifies the desire to employ SNS for recruiting and employer branding: *"I would say that social networks are complementary, especially for positions that are not easily found on the general market" (Q).*

On the operational level, employer branding can help build up the company image (OG1): *"We want to be present on these networks, so that many potential candidates know us and think about us … in order to increase the reach of our employer brand" (Q)*. Moreover, SNS offer a unique possibility for companies to reach a specific target group and initiate a dialogue with it (OG2): *"We want to create a page on Facebook, so that we open up as a company and have a possibility to communicate with our target group" (Q)*. In addition to the strategic and operational goals, companies are motivated to reduce their costs (AG1) for the search of appropriate employees by entering SNS: *"... [via SNS] we want to reach more people for less money and reach more people from those that you would like to reach with less cost" (Q)*.

Other reasons for maintaining an SNS presence concern external factors, most importantly *social pressure from other companies* (EX1), as well as from users. As to the former, other companies such as suppliers (upstream), B2B-customers (downstream), or companies being in the same interest group can exert a certain pressure. This may encourage the company to imitate and create an SNS presence without having any particular goal in mind: *"We*

are in many employer branding interest groups in Germany in which social network presences are debated a lot, and we decided to give it a try and see how it works" (Q). From a user or a (potential) employee perspective, company characteristics such as the company's industry (IC2) can make an SNS presence of a company a must: "*If I were an applicant I would expect from a media company to be present in these networks and to provide a lot of videos and so on*" (Q).

Another reason for being present on SNS is the response of companies to the growth of user-generated content on the Web. Users increasingly engage in discussions about companies, not least about their (justified or unjustified) negative aspects. In order to avoid scandals and damage to a company's image, it has to be able to react to critical content, which can be done by establishing an SNS presence. For example, quite recently a well-known sweets manufacturer felt compelled to create an online presence, after a popular user-generated video on YouTube accused them of environmental crimes [1]. Thus, in response to *social pressure from users* (EX2), companies are building up their online presence in order to control the dissemination of information and to minimize future risks: "*After such a scandal or a crisis, many companies realize that they have to become active in these networks, in order to prevent such things from happening in the future*" *(Q)*. Thus, an SNS presence can aid the company in its risk-management strategy (AG2): "*If a scandal like this happens, we will be ready for this and use SNS for communication and risk mitigation*" *(Q)*. Establishing such a presence, a company can interfere with public Web 2.0 opinion, as well as the public opinion in general, in a credible manner.

Strategies and Actions

In order to achieve the above-mentioned goals, companies employ a variety of strategies supported by a set of actions that can be carried out on SNS. The strategies defined in our model can be subdivided into those that are usually done prior to an SNS entry (initial) and those that should be carried out continuously (ongoing).

4.1.1 Initial Strategies

A purposeful SNS entry normally starts with the *identification and analysis of the target group* (IS1). Quite often, this results in a focus on users characterized by their technical, business and/or Internet affinity: "*Our target group is heterogeneous concerning age or level of experience, but rather homogeneous concerning their technical affinity: we want to reach people who linger in these networks, who have a certain connection with the medium*" (Q). However, the global reach of many SNS provides a unique possibility to reach other target groups, such as people possessing rare skills, who are passively willing to change their job or who will serve as multipliers for those who are in search of a new position: "*... other companies and industries can present themselves successfully and recruit through social media*" (Q). Thus, defining a target group can help achieve a company's goals, for example *recruiting* (OG3) for certain positions that are difficult to staff otherwise: "*The general mass market is only conditionally interesting, as we do not have recruiting problems for, say, clerical positions, but we are interested in people who are able to take on responsibility from the start*" (Q), helping to combat the lack of human resources in some areas (EX3).

Formulating a positioning strategy (IS2) is crucial in order to create a purposeful presence on SNS and includes many facets and principles. First and foremost, companies need to be authentic in defining their brand image and support this image by actions. Otherwise they run the risk of facing undesirable consequences: "*There are companies that don't succeed, because they try to position themselves in the same way as they do in traditional media - by having a classical brand image, for example: BMW - Sheer Driving Pleasure. In social media they better be 'Sheer Driving Pleasure' otherwise they would be taken apart by their audience*" (Q). User empowerment (IC7) is a peculiar characteristic of many SNS that renders authentic communication necessary. Using a *trial-and-error* 'strategy' when building up the SNS presence, i.e. not connecting goals to strategies, can endanger the entire SNS presence: "*...Twitter is hype, so we should also do something on Twitter, without any connection to our topics or any other online presences - then this would be without results, and the presence dies away*" (Q).

At the same time, any SNS presence needs a careful *allocation of resources* (IS3) and a clear assignment of responsibilities for initiation and maintenance: "*There are three people responsible for Twitter, and if users access our account, they can immediately see who they are dealing with*" (Q). The motivation behind naming particular persons is the principle of personality, which aims at presenting the company as a distinct group of people that users can identify with. Companies report that considerable time investments are necessary for SNS maintenance, ranging from several minutes to hours a day, with posting generally requiring less resources than monitoring and reacting: "*Everyone thinks that social media is totally cheap, because it does not cost anything. But it costs a lot of time, and pays off only because it creates attention and gives us a unique chance to initiate a dialogue with potential employees that we don't have otherwise*" (Q). This example clearly illustrates the relationship between goals, strategies and consequences: if companies allocate sufficient resources (IS3), they can receive feedback (CS2) and increase the company image (CS4) with the aim to enhance communication with their target group (OG2).

The *integration of an SNS presence into a company's culture* (IS4) is very important as well. A bridge between current employees and the desired target group can be build by promoting SNS adoption within the company: "*There are representatives of this target group in the company, and no big effort is necessary to convince people to take part in social media, you just have to find a right match between people sharing the same interests*" (Q). This "candidate-to-colleague" approach supports the principles of personality and authenticity and helps to disseminate the necessary content and to decentralize the maintenance process. Thus, this approach can lead to increased communication (CS2) and user bonding (CS7) for those striving to build up their company image (OG1): "*Personnel 2.0 means finding the candidates and linking them to employees, and through this personal contact creating a bond that has a positive impact on the company*" (Q). However, this is rather a long-term process requiring a change in the entire company regarding perception and adoption of SNS (IC4).

4.1.2 Ongoing Strategies

In the short-term, ongoing strategies are adopted in order to reach certain goals. This includes identifying the appropriate success measures from the start, and continuously *measuring performance*

(OS1) in order to justify the invested resources. Defining quantitative success measures helps to achieve desired outcomes, such as an increase in the user base (CS6), recruiting success (CS5) or image enhancement (CS4): "*Be it recruiting or image, the more quantitative results we provide, the more we can say that we employed someone via social media, the more we can justify the time we invested*" (Q). However, the success of an SNS presence is difficult to measure quantitatively, due to intangibility of social media (IC5) and the inability to directly attribute a certain consequence solely to the SNS: "*… maybe people were attracted to our company through SNS, but have placed their application through the website, and thus the direct traceability is really hard to implement*" (Q). Recruiting (OG3), however, is usually just one of the pursued goals of a company on SNS and thus qualitative success metrics, that measure the achievement of more intangible goals, such as image building (OG1), should be considered as well: "*My goal is not only to recruit, but to spread information in order to make the company better known as an employer. Thus, each article that is written about us can already be considered a success*" (Q).

Our findings suggest that if companies spend significant resources on presenting themselves on SNS, they should invest as much to *monitor* (OS2) the developments on SNS. Monitoring should be carried out continuously. However, content can only be controlled to a limited degree, as these manipulations are restricted by the ability of users to verify the content (IC7) and may lead to undesired consequences: "*Something that you can manipulate when you are in social media is the content of the message and the time of posting - but both have to be authentic, otherwise everything can blow up*" (Q). Thus, the companies should try to disseminate information respecting the principles of authenticity and consistency, i.e. present themselves in a positive light, but at the same time be transparent about negative aspects and try to mitigate them in an open dialogue with the users. This can help to achieve user bonding (CS7), which usually comes as an unexpected consequence for the company: "*Before, users were ready to tear the company apart if it admitted that it made a mistake. Nowadays if companies accept their problems, users can't help reacting with a certain degree of understanding*" (Q).

According to our survey results, 75% of the students/graduates stated that they already have noticed information about employers on SNS. Out of these, 62% of the students/graduates found this information useful. Moreover, we asked about the kind of information that is posted by companies (offer of information), and which information potential applicants would find interesting (demand of information), as indicated in Figure 3. As expected, only very few companies (2%) were said to provide information concerning salaries, but almost 40% of the graduates/students would find such kind of information useful. Another mismatch between offer and demand was revealed with regard to experience reports from insiders (23% offer vs. 52% demand) and insights about typical jobs (33% vs. 46%). In general, the information desired the most often was about job postings (63%), which could be an indication for the migration of online recruiting services to SNS in the future.
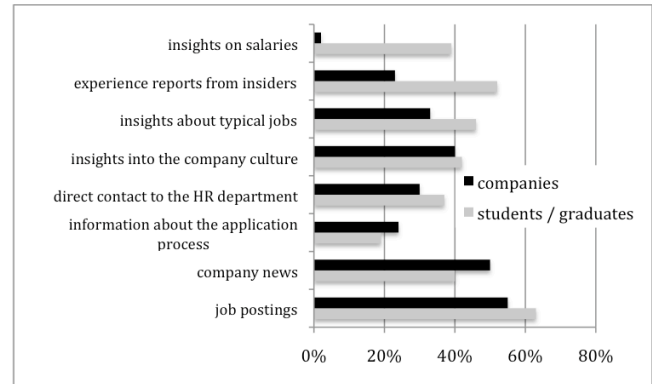

Figure 3. Offer and demand of specific content on SNS

For successful employer branding, companies engage in *marketing campaigns* (OS3) in order to promote their SNS presence and generate an initial audience. High concentration on such campaigns, however, can overshadow some of the operational goals, such as recruiting (OG3): "*We are not yet satisfied with the number of followers and we would like to double them through a campaign, because the goal is to have 700 until the end of the year*" (Q). The question arises whether this 'blind' generation of followers helps to achieve the desired goals, as the number of followers itself does not directly translate to the number of recruited employees (CS5), nor does it indicate that users are attentive to the posted content (CS2): "*There are companies that sell 'likers', that means they guarantee that the page will have a certain amount of 'likers', by presenting the required target group with the necessary advertisements on the network*" (Q).

Another peculiarity of SNS lies in the dynamics of its content as opposed to a static 'classical' website. This peculiarity is exploited by the strategy of *viral marketing* (OS4), which is employed by companies in SNS in order to increase the reach of their content (CS1): "*Today we told 14 people, and they will tell it to their friends. And it works pretty well, because I don't know where else I can post it so that everyone finds out about it*" (Q). Thus, the aim should not only be to reach the target group directly and generate large follower numbers, but also to try to generate good 'transmitters' in the follower base. For example, employment companies, university professors and online marketplaces could act as multipliers: "*From our perspective, Twitter is mostly necessary just to generate traffic on other platforms*" (Q).

As networks of users grow to include new friends and fan pages, *information overload* (IC6) has been found to decrease attention levels and activity on the network [11]. However, the presence of a so-called 'social filter' inherent in SNS helps to reduce information overload, in that it usually delivers the information to the required recipient, without much effort: "*What we do is just throw in a lot of job offers into the network and hope that one friend of a friend of a friend knows someone else who is looking for a job like this one and recommends it to him. And when the job reaches its recipient, and that is exactly the job he was looking for, then it was worth it*" (Q). Thus, the personal character of the message, and the ability of users to know the preferences of their friends better than any other marketing tool, increases the relevance of information and aids companies to achieve their goals.

4.1.3 Actions

The exact actions that companies usually undertake in order to implement the strategies described in our model depend on the functionality of the network (IC1). They can generally be subdivided into three levels, each of which describes a current status of adoption of SNS (Figure 4).

On the first level, *information retrieval* (A1) can deliver valuable insights about specific users, general opinions, current topics or market trends. This can be achieved by regularly monitoring ongoing discussions, by browsing the pages of other companies or users, as well as searching directly for specific users or types of information. One of the most commonly retrieved data from SNS is additional information about potential employees, known as 'background check': "... *some party pictures somewhere on Facebook – that's not interesting for me, I don't have the time to look at them, but with regard to persons who want to work in the social media context we do search for specific indicators of medium affinity - whether they are writing a blog or something*" (Q). Our survey confirms this development: 70% of the professionals confirmed having checked information about applicants on the Internet already. Applicants seem to have adjusted to this trend. 65% of the students/graduates hesitate when posting personal data on SNS, fearing that potential employers could find it. This concern is confirmed by Kluemper and Rosen [10], who state that one can reliably and accurately evaluate personality, intelligence and performance based on information available through SNS.

On the second level, companies can *disseminate desired information* (A2) by means of posting own content, reposting content from someone else, or banning certain content in an attempt to control the information flow. This requires identifying content, frequency and channel for every message.

On the third level, *interaction* (A3) on SNS usually includes discussing certain topics, reacting to questions or directly contacting candidates. This bi-directional communication with users, however, still remains a goal of many companies: "*I have a feeling that this dialogue between users and companies is not yet expected at the moment. I go to the fan page of the company to discuss things with other users, rather than with the company itself*" (Q). The efforts of companies should be directed towards encouraging the dialogue with users and potential employees, as it helps to gather valuable feedback (CS2), get to know their audience better (CS3) and create considerable bonding ties (CS7).
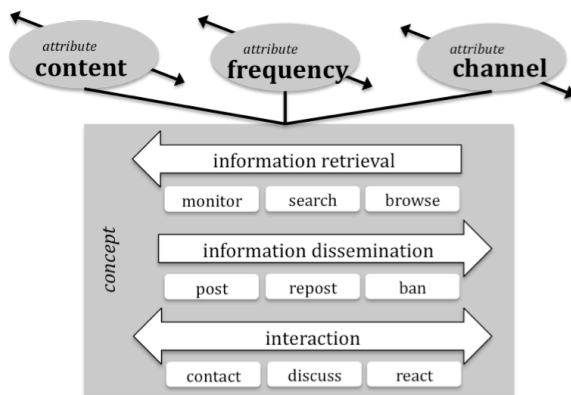

Figure 4. Categorization of possible actions on SNS

Consequences

When companies implement certain strategies, this can lead to the consequences depicted in our framework. These consequences can be subdivided into short-term and long-term ones, both of which can have a recurring impact on the goals. The former usually only have a considerable impact on the adaptation of SNS strategies and thus help achieve goals on the operational level. The latter usually only emerge after a certain time and experience with SNS. They have an impact not only on the presence strategy, but rather on the company itself and thus help fulfill the strategic goals. The variety of effects of a social media presence, which can translate into benefits of SNS under specific circumstances, are presented in the table below.

Table 3. Consequences

Short-term	Communication and feedback benefits	(feedback) "*I ask these questions on Facebook, for example whether people want to see job offers or whether they say it is not the right time...*(A1) *and we are happy to get this feedback* (CS2), *as our goal on the network is communication* (OG2)." (communication) "*This one-to-one dialogue will take place more often as opposed to this one-to-many, which was done by companies through other means before.*"
	Information benefits and information value	(user perspective) "*… they can understand what kind of employer we are, how we work and who works here, what we do every day and how we communicate with each other... - exactly what is interesting for those looking for a job.*" (company perspective) "*We can understand the applicant's expectations in relation to the job he is looking for, whether he is open to get job offers and the like.*"
	Impact on user base (size and composition)	(composition) "*Who is following us? With a high probability, these are other recruiters or companies and just 10% from the real target group. You stay among yourselves*" (size) "*And our Facebook community is growing, in October we had just about 1000 people, and now they are 2000 and I have a feeling that it grows exponentially.*"
	Impact on company image	"*… this open communication and authenticity makes us more tangible and yet more vulnerable, and leads to a sense of presence and a sense of understanding among users of what this company really is*"
	Increased reach of media	"*Facebook has certainly the highest reach because of the hype and the amount of people on that network.*"
	Recruiting benefits	"*We get more applications from the candidates we are interested in.*"
	User bonding and support	"*To communicate with the target group* (OG2) *we connect the candidates with our colleagues and through this personal connection* (IS4) *we create a kind of bonding, a positive stimulus towards the company* (CS7)."

	Loss of control over content	*"Those are the people who are afraid to loose control … I send a message 20.000 times via advertising - and it will be accepted or not, but it does not change as opposed to social media."*
	Increased attention	*"The difference is whether 100 applications come in online or we have just two people that contacted us through Twitter, they are more present, they stand out."*
Long-term	Adapting strategy	*"If I understand that what I post is not accepted, then I can either not care about it or try to change it."*
	Change in decision quality	*"Yes, with Twitter it can be that someone is very active and posts smart things and thus it has a positive influence on our decision."*
	Selection of recruiting channel	*"What is qualitatively better with social media is the first contact, but after that the recruiting process does not change much."*
	Scrutinizing company identity	*"Today you have to define what is our value proposition and what distinguishes us from others in the eyes of the candidate."*
	Synergy effects	*"I think there is a convergence-trend, that everything grows together, and I wonder whether in 5 years we will need a separate career Webpage."*

One of the major advantages of SNS as opposed to other means of information dissemination is the personal aspect that is involved in the transmission process, which usually results in increased information value (CS3) for the participant: *"The big advantage of social media is that it automatically filters information, finding out what is relevant for me from all the things offered there, … irrespective of the incoming amount of information, the information that I really need will reach me"* (Q). This is quite intuitive, as the information received through a friend or via any other type of personal connection is usually regarded the most valuable and the most trusted. In this way, social norms (IC8) prevailing on the networks can increase the quality of information: *"And if someone I trust in tells me that this is important, I totally believe it, even though this information might not have been as important to me before"* (Q). Thus, what matters on SNS for successful employer branding (SG1) is not only the reach of media (CS1), but its personal value (CS3). Companies can easily exploit this property by engaging in viral marketing campaigns (OS4). Thus, SNS allow for a situation where the information is sent and received without much effort, but with a higher relevance than in traditional recruiting or marketing channels.

Our results show that the realization of one consequence can dependent upon another one: *"We have noticed through discussions with other companies that interaction usually only starts (CS2) after they have attracted a certain amount of likers (CS6)"* (Q). Moreover, short-term consequences can lead to the long-term ones as time goes by. For example, companies can adapt their presence strategy (CL1, IS2) in response to obtained feedback (CS2): *"... potential candidates can react by saying that they find it interesting or they find it boring, and based on this we can adapt our posting strategy"* (Q). At the same time, recruiting successes (CS5) can determine the future selection of the recruiting channel (CL4) and favor SNS over other means: *"This is an additional channel, which we use as much as it allows us to come in contact with more candidates we are looking for"* (Q).

This strengthens the gradual development and the circularity of the proposed conceptual model that allows to *accumulate the experience with SNS* (C0) as time goes by and gradually establish themselves as an employer on SNS: *"…we need to see what works well and then adjust the strategy accordingly over time"* (Q). This long-term orientation concerns in particular certain types of goals, such as encouraging interaction and communication with the target group (OG2), as it requires certain changes in the perception of the users and depends on the adoption rate of social media (I4): *"This dialogue orientation is not there yet, both from the side of companies and users, and I think it needs generations of applicants that have been brought up with and can act naturally in this set-up..."* (Q).

The success of the implemented strategies, i.e. the consequences, can be influenced by intervening conditions. For example, network functionality (IC1) can help to achieve synergy effects (CL5) between the networks: *"Things are posted on Twitter, and then they are discussed on Facebook, as the functionality of Twitter allows only for a limited number of words, but has the advantage of a wider audience "* (Q). Additionally, intervening conditions can have an indirect impact on the achievement of certain goals. For example, smaller companies get an equal possibility to present themselves on SNS (OG1) and thus gain even more in terms of image increases (CS4) as compared to their big competitors: *"Through these social media projects, the smaller and less known companies got the possibility to better position themselves"* (Q).

SNS can also cause unexpected consequences in the long-term. For example, in order to present themselves authentically and distinguishably from others (OG1), many companies are forced to incur many changes in order to adjust their company identity: *"Another advantage for the companies is the possibility to find and re-define themselves (CL4). In an attempt to formulate a unique value proposition the companies are having a hard time to admit their problems in certain areas and making decisions to change many things in the company, before presenting it to the general public"* (Q). Thus, employer branding via SNS can scrutinize company identity (CL4) and encourage sustainable improvement.

5. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

In order to build up their presence on SNS, we recommend companies to formulate an 'SNS enter strategy' that consists of two steps, as shown in our conceptual model. The first step (initial strategies, company-internal) includes defining the goals of the SNS presence, determining the amount of resources spent, allocating responsibilities to employees, identifying employees matching the desired applicant ('colleagues-to-candidate' approach), and mobilising them to actively contribute to the SNS, possibly by installing an incentive system.

Companies should carefully choose the SNS where they want to be present. This should be done according to the target group that they want to address, as very specialized candidates are as difficult to find in SNS as through traditional media channels. Thus, if a company is targeting young people (students and graduates), they should consider building up presences in private SNS such as FB in the first place, as young people are mostly active in private SNS (cf. Figure 1). Companies targeting more experienced applicants should predominantly focus on a

"colleague-to-candidate" approach in professional SNS such as XING.

In the second step (ongoing strategies, company-external), the company in question should first monitor the Web 2.0, i.e. it should analyze its existing image in social media in order to find out how to reach its target group (where are they active, which topics are relevant, which questions are discussed). This allows for slowly building up a long-term presence on SNS, disseminating desired information and initiating a dialogue with its target group (see figure 4 for possible actions in SNS).

In order to be successful, SNS strategies should take into consideration many parameters, reflected in our model by the intervening conditions. First, a company should address different strategic questions related to their SNS presence, such as: How experienced is the company in dealing with social media? Are there strategies employed for company or product branding, and should they be aligned with the employer branding strategy? Second, the company characteristics should be considered: the type of business model, the industry and size of the company, which can exert a significant influence on the success strategy as well. It can be suggested that employer branding is generally more effective for companies in consumer industries, such as food or electronics, as their clients are already familiar with their products via general marketing channels. Moreover, smaller companies can achieve a higher leverage in reaching their target groups as compared to traditional media channels. Compared to bigger companies, they might lack the resources to maintain an SNS presence, but at the same time may profit from easily decentralizing the maintenance process.

Moreover, it seems advisable to keep in mind the principles that support their SNS presence, as mentioned above: authenticity (content should be truthful), actuality (content should be regularly updated), consistency (content should be reliable), personality (certain persons should be responsible for maintenance) and peculiarity (companies should define an exclusive value proposition). Similarly, companies should not forget about the dynamics inherent in SNS or the possibility of the content to develop uncontrollably, and find ways to monitor it continuously, as well as interfere.

Our study shows that building and maintaining SNS presences requires a lot of experience. This causes an increased demand for social media consulting services. Companies who consider using SNS for employer branding should carefully deliberate about whether to get consulting or not, as an inability to establish a successful presence may cause damage to the company's image. In any case, SNS presence strategies should be defined before building up SNS presences.

6. CONCLUSION

This study identifies main goals companies pursue for their SNS presence, strategies they apply for employer branding, and possible consequences of establishing themselves on SNS. Based on the analysis of a survey and qualitative in-depth interviews with company representatives, we found that most of our interviewees already use SNS for employer branding or are planning to do so. The global reach of many SNS attracts companies, as various target groups can be found in these networks. Furthermore, we found that many companies do not have explicit strategies for employer branding in SNS and create

online presences just for the sake of 'trying out'. However, if companies expertly follow strategies for building and maintaining SNS presences, they could reach their target groups even more efficiently. If companies succeed in this, they can increase their employer brand awareness, retrieve valuable feedback, establish connections with potential employees, as well as successfully keep existing staff and recruit new employees.

7. LIMITATIONS

In the field of qualitative data analysis, especially in the analysis of interviews, results can be biased. This may be due to the choice of questions, their formulation, or the interpretation of the interviewee's answer by the researcher. Although we analyzed the interviews independently, and formulated the interview questions as open and as careful as possible, we assume that we could not eliminate this bias completely.

The translation can be a cause for further biases. The interviews were conducted in German and had to be translated in order to be presented in this study. The choice of the mother tongue for conducting interviews is justified by Wengraf [23].

Moreover, the numbers in our conceptual model (Figure 2) that indicate the frequency of occurrence of a particular category may be strongly biased. Nevertheless, we indicated them as they can provide additional insights on the relative importance of a particular category in the overall conceptual model. We also report numbers indicating the number of respondents who mentioned a respective category, which can be considered a more reliable indication of importance as they avoid double-counts.

A weakness inherent in qualitative data analysis is the limited sample size. Our interviewees are from a small number of German companies in specific B2C industries. Furthermore, six out of eight interviews were done with only one company representative, whose statements do not necessarily have to be representative for the company.

8. FUTURE WORK

We aim to conduct further interviews in order to extrapolate the insights gained in this study. Moreover, the follow-up study will explore the user perspective in adoption of SNS: motivations behind SNS usage in a professional context and expectations users have regarding SNS presences of companies.

Future research could provide qualitative success measures and parameters to assess the impact of an SNS presence on employer brand awareness. Other interesting topics include the alignment of company-internal and company-external employer branding as well as the interaction between company branding, product branding and employer branding.

9. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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