

A Critical Theory Perspective On Employer Branding Dilemmas in Traditional Companies Attracting Gen Z Talent in the Gig Economy

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Abstract

The gig economy has disrupted traditional employment models, creating significant challenges for conventional companies in attracting Generation Z (Gen Z) talent. This study examines employer branding dilemmas through a Critical Theory lens, exploring power dynamics, structural inequalities, and ideological conflicts between traditional corporate structures and Gen Z's work preferences. Using qualitative data from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with HR professionals and Gen Z freelancers, the research reveals a fundamental mismatch between traditional employer value propositions (job stability, hierarchical growth) and Gen Z's expectations of flexibility, purpose-driven work, and digital-first engagement. Findings highlight systemic contradictions in corporate attempts to reconcile rigid structures with gig economy appeal. The study recommends rethinking employer branding narratives to align with Gen Z's critical perspectives on labor markets, proposing hybrid models that blend security with autonomy. This research contributes to ongoing debates about sustainable talent acquisition in evolving economic landscapes.

Keywords: Employer Branding, Generation Z, Gig Economy, Critical Theory, Talent Acquisition

INTRODUCTION

The gig economy has fundamentally transformed the labor market, presenting traditional companies with unprecedented challenges in attracting and retaining Generation Z (Gen Z) talent. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z workers prioritize flexibility, autonomy, and purpose-driven work over traditional employment benefits such as job stability and hierarchical career progression (Schwartz et al., 2021). This shift has created a significant dilemma for conventional firms, which must now compete with the dynamic appeal of gig work while maintaining their established organizational structures. As the workforce continues to evolve, employer branding strategies rooted in outdated assumptions risk alienating the very talent these companies seek to attract.

The rise of the gig economy reflects broader economic and social changes, including digitalization, the decline of long-term employment contracts, and the growing demand for work-life balance (Kuhn, 2023). Traditional companies, often constrained by rigid policies and bureaucratic hierarchies, struggle to align their employer value propositions (EVPs) with Gen Z's expectations. Research indicates that Gen Z workers are highly critical of exploitative labor practices and seek employers that demonstrate ethical integrity and social responsibility (Smith & Anderson, 2022). This tension exposes deeper ideological conflicts between corporate structures and the evolving values of the younger workforce.

Prior studies have explored employer branding from various perspectives, yet few have applied a Critical Theory lens to analyze the inherent power dynamics and structural inequalities at play. Critical Theory, with its emphasis on questioning dominant ideologies and uncovering systemic contradictions, provides a valuable framework for understanding why traditional employer branding often fails to resonate with Gen Z (Fleming, 2022). As noted by Petriglieri et al. (2020), "The contemporary labor market is not just an economic space but a battleground of competing narratives about work, identity, and power" (p. 145). This perspective is crucial in dissecting why conventional companies face difficulties in adapting to the gig economy's disruptive influence.

Existing research highlights a growing disconnect between employer branding strategies and the actual experiences of Gen Z workers. For instance, a study by Deloitte (2023) found that 67% of

Gen Z freelancers reject traditional corporate jobs due to perceived inflexibility and lack of meaningful engagement. Meanwhile, HR professionals in traditional firms often underestimate the importance of digital-first communication and participatory work cultures (Meister & Willyerd, 2021). This mismatch suggests that without a fundamental rethinking of employer branding narratives, traditional companies risk losing talent to more agile and responsive gig platforms.

Despite these challenges, some organizations have begun experimenting with hybrid models that incorporate gig-like flexibility within traditional employment frameworks. For example, companies like Unilever and Microsoft have introduced project-based roles and remote work options to appeal to younger workers (Spreitzer et al., 2022). However, such initiatives remain exceptions rather than the norm, underscoring the need for systemic change. As Cappelli and Keller (2021) argue, "The future of work is not about choosing between stability and flexibility but about redefining the employer-employee relationship in a way that balances both". This insight reinforces the urgency of reimagining employer branding in the context of the gig economy.

Given these complexities, this research seeks to critically examine the employer branding dilemmas faced by traditional companies in attracting Gen Z talent. By employing a Critical Theory perspective, the study aims to uncover the ideological and structural barriers that hinder effective talent acquisition strategies. The findings will contribute to ongoing debates on sustainable workforce engagement, offering actionable recommendations for companies navigating the tensions between traditional employment models and the gig economy's demands.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing a Critical Theory lens to explore the employer branding dilemmas faced by traditional companies in attracting Gen Z talent within the gig economy. Qualitative methods are particularly suited for this inquiry, as they allow for an in-depth examination of power dynamics, ideological tensions, and lived experiences that quantitative approaches may overlook (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By prioritizing narrative and discourse analysis, this research captures the nuanced perspectives of both HR professionals and Gen Z freelancers, revealing contradictions between corporate branding strategies and the expectations of the emerging workforce.

Data collection was conducted through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with two key participant groups: HR professionals from traditional companies and Gen Z freelancers engaged in gig work. Each FGD consisted of 6-8 participants, ensuring diverse viewpoints while maintaining a manageable discussion dynamic (Krueger & Casey, 2021). The sessions were semi-structured, guided by open-ended questions exploring themes such as perceptions of employer branding, workplace autonomy, and the appeal of gig economy flexibility. This approach facilitated organic dialogue, allowing participants to articulate their experiences and critiques freely. The FGDs were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and critical contradictions.

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase framework, ensuring systematic coding and interpretation of the data. Initial codes were derived inductively, with emergent themes refined through iterative review and critical reflection. To enhance credibility, member checking was employed, allowing participants to validate preliminary findings (Lincoln & Guba, 2022). Additionally, a Critical Theory perspective was applied to interrogate underlying power structures and ideological assumptions within employer branding narratives. This methodological approach not only illuminates the disconnect between traditional firms and Gen Z talent but also contributes to broader discussions on equitable and adaptive labor practices in a rapidly evolving economy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study reveals a fundamental tension between traditional employer branding strategies and the expectations of Generation Z in the gig economy. While conventional companies emphasize stability, hierarchical career progression, and long-term employment as core value propositions, Gen Z participants consistently prioritize flexibility, purpose-driven work, and digital-native engagement. As one Gen Z freelancer noted, "Why would I commit to a 9-to-5 job with rigid structures when I can choose projects that align with my values and work on my terms?" This sentiment was echoed across multiple focus groups, underscoring a generational shift in how work is perceived—not merely as a means of survival but as an extension of personal identity and autonomy (Smith & Anderson, 2022).

A striking finding was the disconnect between HR professionals' assumptions and Gen Z's actual priorities. Many corporate representatives believed that job security and benefits remained compelling incentives, yet freelancers viewed these as secondary to intangible factors such as mental well-being, ethical employer practices, and opportunities for skill diversification. One HR manager admitted, "We're still selling the dream of climbing the corporate ladder, but they aren't buying it." This misalignment suggests that traditional firms must critically reassess their employer branding narratives to remain relevant in a labor market increasingly dominated by gig work (Deloitte, 2023).

Power dynamics emerged as a recurring theme, with Gen Z participants expressing skepticism toward top-down organizational structures. They perceived traditional workplaces as perpetuating inequities, where autonomy is reserved for senior roles while entry-level employees face surveillance and rigid protocols. "In gig work, I'm judged by my output, not my hours logged," remarked a participant, highlighting a preference for meritocratic over bureaucratic systems. These critiques align with Critical Theory's emphasis on exposing systemic inequalities in labor relations (Fleming, 2022). The data suggest that companies failing to address these critiques risk being perceived as outdated or exploitative.

Notably, the research uncovered a paradox in Gen Z's relationship with gig work: while they valued its flexibility, many also expressed concerns about financial instability and the lack of social protections. "I love the freedom, but some months I'm barely scraping by," shared one freelancer. This duality complicates the gig economy's appeal and presents an opportunity for traditional employers to differentiate themselves by offering hybrid models blending structure with autonomy, security with flexibility. Examples like Microsoft's "flexible careers" program, which allows employees to alternate between projects and roles, were cited as promising compromises (Spreitzer et al., 2022).

The study also identified generational differences in communication preferences. Gen Z participants expected seamless, digital-first interactions from recruitment to daily collaboration, whereas traditional firms often relied on analog processes. "If your careers page isn't mobile-friendly or your onboarding takes weeks of paperwork, you've already lost me," quipped a participant. These insights underscore the need for employer branding to evolve beyond messaging and adapt to the technological and cultural norms of younger workers (Meister & Willyerd, 2021).

Ultimately, the findings challenge traditional companies to reconcile their institutional legacies with the demands of a critical, digitally fluent workforce. Rather than superficially adopting gig economy trends (casual Fridays or token remote work policies), firms must address deeper structural contradictions. As Petriglieri et al. (2020) argue, "The future of work belongs to organizations that can balance accountability with empathy, and efficiency with humanity." This research advocates for employer branding that transcends transactional relationships and fosters a shared sense of purpose—a narrative resonant enough to compete with the gig economy's allure.

Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate a fundamental ideological clash between traditional corporate structures and the evolving expectations of Generation Z workers in the gig economy. Our research confirms previous observations by Kuhn (2023) that digital-native generations view work not merely as an economic necessity but as an extension of personal identity and values. This paradigm shift challenges conventional employer branding that emphasizes job security and hierarchical advancement-value propositions that increasingly fail to resonate with younger workers who prioritize autonomy and purpose (Schwartz et al., 2021). The persistent adherence to these traditional narratives reveals what Fleming (2022) describes as "corporate ideological lag," where organizations struggle to adapt their messaging to reflect rapidly changing labor market realities.

The power dynamics uncovered in our study merit particular attention. Gen Z's skepticism toward traditional workplace hierarchies aligns with Petriglieri et al.'s (2020) conceptualization of the "identity precarity" inherent in modern work arrangements. Our participants' preference for meritocratic evaluation over bureaucratic supervision suggests a fundamental rejection of what Cappelli and Keller (2021) term "industrial-era employment models." This finding has profound implications for employer branding, suggesting that traditional companies must move beyond superficial flexibility initiatives and address deeper structural inequalities to remain competitive in talent acquisition.

Interestingly, the ambivalence expressed by Gen Z participants regarding gig work's financial instability presents an opportunity for traditional employers. As Spreitzer et al. (2022) note, the most forward-thinking organizations are creating "hybrid value propositions" that combine the security of traditional employment with the autonomy of gig work. Our findings support this approach, suggesting that employer branding should emphasize not just what companies offer, but how they offer it, with particular attention to work design, communication styles, and opportunities for self-directed growth (Meister & Willyerd, 2021).

The digital divide in workplace expectations emerged as another critical finding. Gen Z's demand for seamless, mobile-optimized interactions reflects what Smith and Anderson (2022) identify as the "digital-first imperative" in contemporary employment relationships. This goes beyond mere technological capability, representing instead a fundamental difference in how younger workers conceptualize organizational boundaries and communication norms. Traditional companies that fail to bridge this digital-cultural gap risk appearing not just outdated, but fundamentally misaligned with Gen Z's worldview.

Ultimately, this study suggests that successful employer branding for Gen Z requires more than cosmetic changes to messaging. As Deloitte's (2023) research corroborates, it demands a critical examination and potential restructuring of workplace power dynamics, communication flows, and value creation models. The most effective strategies will likely be those that authentically address Gen Z's dual desires for autonomy and community, flexibility and security, creating what we might term "structured freedom" as a new paradigm for employer-employee relationships in the digital age.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the critical misalignment between traditional employer branding strategies and the evolving expectations of Generation Z in the gig economy. The findings reveal that Gen Z workers prioritize autonomy, purpose-driven work, and digital-first engagement over conventional value propositions like job stability and hierarchical advancement. This generational shift reflects deeper ideological and structural tensions in the modern labor market, where traditional companies must reconcile their rigid frameworks with the gig economy's appeal for flexibility and meritocratic evaluation. Without meaningful adaptation, organizations risk becoming obsolete in the competition for top talent, highlighting the urgent need for employer branding strategies that authentically address Gen Z's values and work preferences.

Moving forward, traditional companies must embrace hybrid models that blend the security of established employment with the autonomy of gig work, while also addressing systemic power imbalances and digital-cultural gaps. As the workforce continues to evolve, employer branding must shift from transactional messaging to fostering genuine, purpose-driven relationships with employees. By critically examining and restructuring workplace dynamics, organizations can position themselves as attractive alternatives to gig work, offering not just stability but also the flexibility, transparency, and ethical integrity that Gen Z demands. The future of talent acquisition lies in bridging these divides, creating workplaces that are both adaptive and equitable in an era of unprecedented change.

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