

Prompting positive perceptions

A qualitative study exploring job seekers' and companies' perceptions of
communication about AI in employer branding

Elina Westberg

Hanna Tapper Uudelepp

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Stockholm School of Economics

Supervisor: Elmira van den Broek

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Abstract

The recent surge in AI has sparked considerable interest in the job market. Companies have increasingly started talking about AI in their communication with potential employees, and job seekers have expressed preference for employers that allow them to engage with AI technologies. While existing research has explored how employer branding communication about emerging business trends, i.e. CSR, influences employer attractiveness, it provides limited insights into how job seekers perceive such communication about AI. Consequently, this study aims to examine how job seekers and companies perceive communication about AI within the employer branding context and to identify factors that influence job seekers' perceptions of such communication in terms of employer attractiveness. A qualitative research method was employed, involving 29 semi-structured interviews with company representatives from management consultancies and job seekers pursuing master's degrees in business or engineering. The findings revealed that companies and job seekers generally perceive communication about AI in employer branding positively, though certain complexities introduce nuances to the job seekers' perceptions. To navigate these complexities, the study presents a conceptual framework encompassing factors, both within and outside the company's control, that were shown to influence job seekers' perception of communication about AI and, ultimately, employer attractiveness. The controllable communication factors shown to influence job seekers' perception of communication about AI positively include the specificity and concreteness of the content, the learning possibilities regarding AI within the company, the transparency of the company's current state and trajectory for AI and the balance between the potentials and challenges of AI. This study contributes to the existing literature by offering new insights into the intersection between perceptions of AI, employer branding communication, and employer attractiveness. It further contributes to companies' recruitment practices, strategically leveraging AI content in their EB communication, ultimately enhancing their ability to attract talent.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, Employer branding communication, Employer attractiveness, Perceptions

Supervisor: Elmira van den Broek, *Assistant Professor*, Department of Entrepreneurship, Innovation and Technology

Authors: Elina Westberg (42316), Hanna Tapper Uudelepp (42323)

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Definitions and Glossary

Term	The definition used in this study
Employer branding	The package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the employing company (Ambler & Barrow, 1996)
Employer attractiveness	The envisioned benefits that a potential employee sees in working for a specific organisation (Berthon et al., 2005)
Artificial Intelligence	Technological components that collect, process, and act on data in ways that simulate human intelligence (Canhoto & Clear, 2020)
Generative AI	Deep learning model that is able to create text, images, and other content based on training data (Berg et al., 2023)
ChatGPT	ChatGPT (Chat Generative Pre-Trained Transformer) is a pre-trained language model that leverages a broad internet-based dataset to execute a range of natural language processing tasks, primarily focusing on text generation (Kasneci et al., 2023)
AI Anxiety	An overall affective response of anxiety or fear and feelings of agitation about out-of-control AI that inhibits an individual from interacting with AI (Johnson & Verdicchio, 2017)
AI Washing	It involves exaggerating the capabilities of a product or service that is sold as “AI” in order to make it look more sophisticated, innovative or intelligent than it actually is (Marr, 2024)
Innovation	Innovation is the multi-stage process whereby organisations transform ideas into new/improved products, service or processes, in order to advance, compete and differentiate themselves successfully in their marketplace (Baregheh et al., 2009)
Corporate Social Responsibility	A concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis (The European Commission, 2011)
Perception	A belief or opinion, often held by many people and based on how things seem (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.)
Job seeker	Individual that is in the process of seeking an employment

Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Definition
AI	Artificial Intelligence
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
EB	Employer Branding
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
GenAI	Generative Artificial Intelligence

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I think it's great to have companies that can communicate about AI. It actually makes me feel more like: this is the future. This is where I want to work. – J18

Just based on feeling, I think AI-washing is 99% of everything you see. A very high percentage, probably 9 out of 10, of all communication from companies. – J16

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Today, a company's success largely depends on its ability to find and attract the right talent (van Esch & Black, 2019). The concept "war for talent" describes the current difficulties in recruiting key talent, a primary concern according to 82% of Fortune 500 executives (Keller & Meaney, 2017). To attract top talent, companies are increasingly implementing sophisticated, targeted communication and marketing strategies through a process known as Employer Branding (EB) to enhance the employer's attractiveness (Baratelli & Colleoni, 2022). About 50% of all firms, included in a report by WMAE (2023), increased their EB budgets from 2022 to 2023, highlighting the growing importance of EB today. To develop effective EB strategies, companies need to understand what attracts job seekers and how to craft communications within their channels that are positively perceived. The preferences of those entering the workforce today differ from those just a couple of years ago (Reis & Braga, 2016), underscoring the need for companies to continually evolve and innovate to remain relevant.

Over the past few years, artificial intelligence (AI) has received significant attention in both the business world and academia, particularly with the emergence of generative AI (GenAI) (Prasad Agrawal, 2023). AI, defined as "technological components that collect, process, and act on data in ways that simulate human intelligence" (Canhoto & Clear, 2020, p. 184), sets itself apart from previous technologies. It represents not just a static technology but rather a rapidly advancing frontier of emerging computing capabilities that is continuously evolving (Berente et al., 2021). This evolution has sparked excitement among companies eager to harness these new technologies, as well as notable enthusiasm among students keen to engage with these innovations. For example, a study by Gurchiek (2023) found that 21% of recent graduates favour job opportunities that involve working with GenAI technologies like ChatGPT and DALL-E rather than those that do not offer such possibility. Despite significant attention in the field of AI along with data indicating interest among job seekers, research exploring AI as a key element for companies in attracting employees is limited.

Today, companies are increasingly incorporating communication about AI in their branding efforts in diverse ways to various stakeholders (Baker-Brunnbauer, 2020). For instance, in 2022, 1000 companies mentioned AI in their annual reports, marking a significant surge and

reflecting a 270% increase from a decade ago (Zakharenko, 2023). Additionally, the number of job advertisements on platforms like LinkedIn and Indeed that mention AI has substantially increased over the past two years (Hyatt, 2023; Kiderlin, 2023). This trend extends to companies' communication efforts on social media wherein a single week of January 2024, each of the MBB firms (McKinsey & Company, Boston Consulting Group, and Bain & Company), as well as the Big Four (Deloitte, PwC, EY, and KPMG), referenced AI in their external communications (Appendix A). Although most of this communication can be seen as client-oriented, certain efforts, such as communicating AI-related student events, clearly target job seekers (Appendix B).

The extent to which companies should communicate about AI when targeting job seekers and whether they perceive this as appealing has yet to be extensively explored in literature. Past research suggests the influence could be twofold. On the one hand, studies have indicated that younger populations tend to have a positive attitude towards AI, and communicating organisational innovativeness has been shown to increase an employer's attractiveness (Schepman & Rodway, 2023; Sommer et al., 2017). On the other hand, AI anxiety, characterised by fears of uncontrollable technological advancements and job displacement, does exist (Johnson & Verdicchio, 2017; Wang et al., 2022) and could potentially affect job seekers' perceptions of such communication. Moreover, there is a risk that communication about AI might be perceived as misleading, as communication about other emerging business trends, such as corporate social responsibility (CSR), have had such reactions (Sauter, 2023). This indicates that communication about AI could potentially negatively influence the employer's attractiveness among job seekers, as demonstrated by cases where CSR communication was perceived as misleading (Speckemeier & Tsivrikos, 2022). Thus, existing research provides insights indicating that job seekers may perceive communication about AI positively, but there are also studies indicating the opposite, underscoring the complexity of the field.

The contrasting viewpoints in previous research on the perception of AI and its use in EB communications suggest a multifaceted and ambiguous field. With limited literature addressing this topic, this complexity emphasises the need for additional research to better understand and define the role of AI in this domain.

1.2 Purpose and Research Questions

To address the intricacies outlined above, this study aims to explore how job seekers and companies perceive communication about AI within the EB context. By adopting a dual-perspective approach, this study seeks to capture a more comprehensive understanding of the perceptions of the job market than would be possible if only one perspective were included. In addition, this approach facilitates a nuanced comparison of the views and enhances the understanding of the alignment between the perceptions of job seekers and companies. Lastly, the study aims to identify factors influencing job seekers' perceptions of communication about AI, ultimately shaping the attractiveness of the company communicating it.

To fulfil this purpose, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- *How do job seekers and companies perceive communication about AI in the context of employer branding?*
- *What factors influence job seekers' perceptions of communication about AI in terms of employer attractiveness?*

1.3 Scope and Delimitation

This study focuses on understanding companies' and job seekers' perceptions of communication about AI in the context of EB. The study is delimited to exploring EB communication targeting potential rather than current employees. The scope is delimited exclusively to companies in the management consultancy sector, a decision based on the observed engagement with communication about AI among such companies. A cross-sectional research design was employed to understand the underlying perceptions in-depth, where 29 semi-structured interviews were conducted. The sample consists of nine company representatives from eight different management consultancies, all active in the Swedish job market. The sample also included 20 job seekers, specifically master's degree students in business and management or industrial engineering from various higher educational institutions in Sweden. These criteria were chosen explicitly because these individuals reflect the primary demographic of management consultancies' EB efforts (Loos, 2023). The sample composition, with a larger proportion of job seekers compared to company representatives, was chosen to reflect the more significant number of job seekers in the population pool targeted by

management consultancies. Additionally, it should be noted that this study is limited to investigating perceptions regarding communication about AI in EB rather than perceptions regarding the usage of AI in EB.

1.4 Expected Contribution

The study's expected contribution is twofold, aiming to deliver relevant insights for both researchers and practitioners. For researchers, the study intends to explore the relationship between EB communication and employer attractiveness within the context of AI, building on existing literature that shows how communication about innovations influences employer attractiveness (Sommer et al., 2017). Additionally, it seeks to contribute to research examining perceptions of AI in the workplace among job seekers, looking at factors that influence such perceptions. Moreover, it aims to enrich the body of research on EB communication related to emerging business trends by expanding the discourse to include the emerging field of AI. For practitioners, the study aims to provide actionable insights for companies navigating the integration of communication about AI into their EB strategies. By helping practitioners understand the perceptions among job seekers regarding communication about AI, they can become better equipped to craft effective EB strategies.

2. Literature Review

This section provides an overview of existing literature relevant to the research questions. It begins by presenting existing literature on Employer Branding Communication (2.1) and Employer Attractiveness (2.2) and expands to encompass what has been done within emerging business trends related to these topics. The literature on Perceptions of AI is then explored (2.3), followed by the identified Research Gap (2.4). Lastly, the study's theoretical lens, signalling theory, is presented (2.5).

2.1 Employer Branding Communication

Over the past 25 years, core marketing principles, especially those related to the science of branding, have significantly impacted human resource practices (Theurer et al., 2018). The EB concept emerged in the 1990s, combining branding techniques with human resource practices, emphasising the need for organisations to attract and retain skilled talent (Rzemieniak & Wawer, 2021). Ambler and Barrow (1996) are credited with introducing the concept of EB, which they describe as “the package of functional, economical, and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company” (p. 3). Another pair of prominent authors in the field of EB, Backhaus and Tikoo (2004), offers a definition that emphasises the creation of a distinct employer identity: “the process of building an identifiable and unique employer identity, and the employer brand as a concept of the firm that differentiates it from competitors” (p. 502). This latter perspective emphasises how a company’s identity is perceived compared to others. Research on EB lacks a unified consensus regarding its target group. While some research emphasises targeting potential and current employees, most empirical studies primarily focus on external branding, which specifically targets job seekers (Lane, 2016).

EB encompasses strategic communications that articulate the identity of the employer and the reasons why job seekers should consider them as a potential employer (Botha et al., 2011). In this communication, various attributes can be highlighted to articulate the employer identity, including transactional attributes, such as tangible benefits like salary, and relational attributes, such as work-life balance and career growth opportunities (Deepa & Baral, 2020). A distinct employer value proposition is often crafted, strategically selecting attributes designed to appeal

to job seekers (Theurer et al., 2018). Research has shown that these attributes must be distinctive to enable a firm to secure a competitive advantage in the field of recruitment (Deepa & Baral, 2020).

Employers can communicate these attributes through a variety of channels. For instance, these channels could include the company's website, social media platforms, current employees, and company events or career fairs (Buitek et al., 2023; Kissel & Büttgen, 2015; Kraichy & Chapman, 2014; Walker et al., 2009). Research has demonstrated that the choice of information channel is critical for job seekers when evaluating potential employers (Buitek et al., 2023). Specifically, a company's website and social media have proven effective in enhancing an employer's attractiveness (Cable & Turban, 2003; Panagiotidou & Mihail, 2022; Sivertzen et al., 2013). Further findings by Buitek et al. (2023) indicate that word of mouth and recruitment advertising are the preferred channels for achieving employer attractiveness, as they are perceived as the most credible sources.

Another factor influencing how EB communication is perceived is the quality of the information communicated (Buitek et al., 2023; Gray & Meister, 2004). Research indicates that when job seekers perceive a company's communication as insufficient, inconsistent, or incorrect, they view joining the company as riskier and less attractive (Wilden et al., 2010). Therefore, maintaining a consistent and truthful representation of the company across all communication channels is crucial for organisations (Christensen et al., 2009). Integrating communication efforts that align with the organisation's core values is one strategy to enhance consistency and improve the quality of information communicated to job seekers (Pandita, 2022). In addition, psychological research suggests that communication perceived as vulnerable, which transparently highlights the sender's flaws, is often viewed more positively, as it is regarded as more honest (Bruk et al., 2018). Information quality is also linked to the concrete and detailed nature of the information provided. Past research indicates that detailed recruitment advertisements lead to positive reactions from job seekers, enabling them to understand better what the company represents (Roberson et al., 2005). Building on this, Klimkiewicz and Oltra (2017) discovered that an employer's appeal is enhanced when the communication is concrete, as opposed to general.

Having considered the general principles of EB communication, the focus now shifts to examining how these strategies are applied to emerging business trends in existing research. This exploration aims to shed light on the application of AI within EB communication.

2.1.1 Employer Branding Communication of Emerging Business Trends

Despite the extensive research on EB communication, there is still minimal research on companies' incorporation of communication about AI in their EB communication efforts. There is, however, research exploring communication about AI in other contexts. For example, Fredström et al. (2022) suggest that firms use AI-related terminology over machine learning-related terms to convey their innovative efforts effectively. The authors attribute this suggestion to AI's positive association with forward-looking technology, which tends to attract better market sentiments. Additionally, Nishant et al. (2023) explored how public companies should communicate about AI to shareholders, finding that failing to discuss potential risks about the technology when announcing their AI capabilities typically leads to negative market reactions.

Given the limited research on communication about AI in the EB context, this study will explore EB communication around other emerging business trends, aiming to shed light on how it could be related to communication about AI. Since there are clear research streams regarding how CSR and innovativeness are communicated in EB, these streams will be further explored in the following sections.

To begin with, regarding innovativeness, research indicates that communicating about innovation to job seekers is beneficial for establishing a distinct brand image (Ek Styvén et al., 2022; Panagiotidou & Mihail, 2022). Additionally, Panagiotidou and Mihail (2022) identify social media and company websites as the most effective channels for communicating about innovation, noting that young job seekers favour these platforms for their comprehensive information and strong symbolic impact. Furthermore, concerning which aspects of innovativeness should be communicated to optimise effectiveness, Piva and Stroe (2023) recommend that entrepreneurs highlight their ventures' unique, innovative features when interacting with job seekers. On the same topic, Sommer et al. (2017) suggest that companies should communicate an open and innovative organisational culture rather than solely product innovativeness. They also suggest that for such communication to be successful, it should

emphasise openness, flexibility, creativity, and a willingness to take risks to attract innovative job seekers.

Regarding CSR in EB communication, research by Lock and Schulz-Knappe (2019) indicates that effectively communicating CSR activities is crucial for achieving organisational success and establishing corporate legitimacy, which entails adhering to established social norms and expectations (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006). However, achieving this effectiveness in communication requires understanding that it can vary based on multiple factors. For instance, the positive perception toward CSR communication will increase if such communication targets individuals with more favourable attitudes towards CSR (Klimkiewicz & Oltra, 2017). Additionally, for CSR communication to be effective, it should provide concrete information, such as videos or infographics, that clearly demonstrate how CSR policies integrate into the firm's strategy (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006). Research also underscores the importance of honesty and credibility in CSR communication, where several studies indicate that when organisations are transparent about their partly extrinsic motives, it can enhance the company's perception positively (Du et al., 2010; Ellen et al., 2006; Forehand & Grier, 2003). Furthermore, existing research also highlights challenges in communication about CSR due to the growing practice of greenwashing (Bernstein, 2009; Fukukawa et al., 2007; Nyilasy et al., 2014). Seele and Gatti (2017) argue that while CSR communication is employed to gain legitimacy, it risks backfiring when companies are accused of greenwashing, ultimately undermining corporate legitimacy rather than enhancing it.

To summarise, there is existing research on the communication of AI in contexts other than EB, as well as studies on EB communication regarding other emerging business trends, such as innovativeness and CSR. Although the insights from these studies may shed light on how communication about AI could be perceived, an in-depth examination of such a topic remains relatively unexplored. This represents a significant research gap, as the communication approaches applied in other contexts may not fully capture AI's unique aspects, including its complexity, rapid pace of change, and the uncertainty surrounding its long-term impact on employment (Berente et al., 2021).

2.2 Employer Attractiveness

A closely related concept to EB is the notion of employer attractiveness, which has been extensively examined in disciplines such as management, applied psychology, communication, and marketing (Berthon et al., 2005; Kashive & Khanna, 2017). It is defined as a potential employee's envisioned benefits in working for a specific organisation (Berthon et al., 2005). Furthermore, it has been described as a competitive advantage for employers that will enhance their likelihood of attracting talent (Cable & Turban, 2003).

The most common way to measure employer attractiveness is using the employer attractiveness scale (EmpAt Scale). The scale was created by Berthon et al. (2005) and stemmed from Ambler and Barrow's (1996) dimensions for psychological, functional, and economic benefits and has become one of the most popular EB theories in contemporary research (Islamiaty et al., 2022). It has been created and validated as a multi-item scale to pinpoint and operationalise the dimensions of employer image, which subsequently has been shown to influence employer attractiveness. There are five building blocks of the attractiveness of an employer's brand, two of which are *interest value* and *development value* (Berthon et al., 2005). Interest value evaluates the attractiveness of an employer that provides an exciting and innovative work environment, emphasising creativity and interest in products or services. Development value measures the support for career-enhancing experiences, potential for future opportunities, and recognition. Research shows that the development dimension is especially important among people newly entering their careers (Dassler et al., 2022). On the same topic, research suggests that two of the most essential organisational attributes for students are "investing heavily in the training and development of their employees" and "clear opportunities for long-term career progression" (Terjesen et al., 2007, p. 504). The EmpAt Scale has been applied worldwide, and multiple scholars have built on this theory and proposed additional dimensions like authenticity (Reis et al., 2017) and work-life balance (Dabirian et al., 2017) as elements influencing an employer's attractiveness.

Furthermore, extensive research has explored how employer attractiveness varies across different demographics and organisational contexts, dissecting how various factors influence job seekers' preferences. For example, Vogel and Sazger (2024) highlight a notable disparity in employer attractiveness between public and private sector employees. They find that public sector workers place less emphasis on altruistic and intrinsic attributes, instead prioritising social characteristics in evaluating potential employers. Moreover, job seekers' demographics,

such as gender, have been shown to influence perceptions of an employer's attractiveness, with Chapman et al.'s (2005) meta-analysis revealing that women tend to prioritise job characteristics that reduce conflict with nonwork roles, e.g., location and flexible hours, whereas men prioritise organisational justice.

In addition to exploring how broader dimensions like interest and developmental value influence employer attractiveness, earlier research has examined the effects of incorporating specific topics or trends into a company's EB communications. This will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

2.2.1 Emerging Business Trends Influencing Employer Attractiveness

The current literature features limited research on whether and how a company's engagement with AI influences employer attractiveness. Hence, it could be valuable to explore how other emerging trends, besides AI, have been shown to influence an employer's appeal. Similar to section 2.1.2, which examined business trends related to EB communication, the existing body of literature on employer attractiveness includes business trends such as CSR and innovation. Therefore, this section will elaborate on these research streams to deepen the understanding of how a company's engagement with AI could influence its attractiveness as an employer.

Extensive research has been conducted on CSR and how companies' CSR activities relate to their attractiveness as employers across different contexts and demographics. This body of research predominately demonstrates a positive correlation. For instance, Ma et al. (2022) underscore that a company's dedication to CSR, mainly through promoting a green corporate image, significantly increases its attractiveness to job seekers. On the same topic, Alniacik et al. (2011) found that job seekers tend to favour companies known for their environmental consciousness over those perceived as less environmentally friendly. However, Ma et al. (2023) discovered that such a positive correlation is less evident among job seekers when the financial compensation is high, indicating that other organisational attributes play a more significant role. Furthermore, some research has examined the influence of job seekers' demographics on this topic. For instance, Ngoc Thang et al. (2023) identified that integrating social and environmental issues into corporate strategy resonates particularly well with Generation Z job seekers. Additionally, Barrena-Martínez et al. (2015) focused more on the characteristics of the job seeker, finding that individuals with an existing awareness of CSR practices tend to

perceive companies that engage in such practices as more attractive employers compared to those who are less aware.

The relationship between a company's commitment to innovation and its attractiveness as an employer has also been extensively studied, almost consistently revealing a positive correlation. For instance, Berthon et al. (2005), founders of the EmpAt Scale, recognised innovation as a crucial component within the interest value dimension, highlighting its significant role in enhancing employer attractiveness. Building on this, Sivertzen et al. (2013) suggested incorporating an *innovation value* into the original EmpAt Scale, supporting their proposal with evidence that innovation is a key factor in increasing employer appeal. Further emphasising the importance of innovation, Ek Styvén et al. (2022) noted that a sense of innovation in the workplace is crucial for attracting job seekers. Adding depth to the discussion, Sommer (2017) found that a company's appeal is enhanced when having an innovative culture and product portfolio. Additionally, the work by Lievens and Highhouse (2003) delved into the reasons behind this positive correlation, suggesting that job seekers' desire to align with companies that reflect their self-concept and personal identity drives their preference for employers perceived as innovative.

To conclude, previous research has generally shown a positive correlation between a company's engagement in CSR or innovation and increased employer attractiveness. Whether this trend extends to companies engaging in AI remains to be thoroughly examined, as an in-depth exploration is lacking in current literature. Considering the complexities and subtleties of the AI field (Berente et al., 2021), involvement in AI may have no impact or could even diminish a company's attractiveness as an employer. The following section will delve deeper into the perceptions of AI to better understand how this field could be perceived.

2.3 Perceptions of AI

Numerous previous studies have explored perceptions and attitudes toward AI in various contexts. Many studies suggest that individual attributes significantly influence these perceptions and attitudes toward AI. For example, introverts, individuals with greater openness to experiences, lower future phobia, and subjective knowledge of AI, tend to hold a more positive attitude towards AI (Centeno-Martín et al., 2023; Kaya et al., 2022; Schepman & Rodway, 2023). Additional research has examined external influences on attitudes, including

cultural values (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2023) and factors such as industry type and the stage of AI progression within a company (Vasiljeva et al., 2021). Moreover, previous literature offers insights into the perceptions that shape attitudes. For instance, positive attitudes towards AI are often driven by the perception of its benefits (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2023), while negative attitudes stem from perceptions of dehumanising aspects, job-related threats, caution, or fear (Schepman & Rodway, 2023).

Furthermore, some studies focus on the perceptions of AI, such as Cardon et al. (2023), who found that US employees perceive GenAI as a means to enhance work. Koo et al. (2021) further illustrate the mixed attitudes among workers towards AI, noting that while they recognise its benefits, such as assistance with tasks and the creation of new roles, they also have concerns about AI potentially making their jobs unnecessary. Lastly, recent studies have explored the primary motivations for using AI in the workplace, identifying productivity, creativity, learning opportunities, and innovation as the main aspects (Skjuve et al., 2023).

2.3.1 Job Seekers' Perceptions of AI in Terms of Employer Attractiveness

As described above, extensive research has been conducted on how attitudes and perceptions towards AI are shaped. However, there is limited insight into whether and how job seekers' perceptions of companies engaging in AI influence employer attractiveness. Nonetheless, existing research could provide valuable insights into this area. Therefore, the following section will shed light on how a company's engagement with AI may positively or negatively influence its attractiveness as an employer.

Support for the idea that companies actively engaging in AI may become more appealing to job seekers starts with findings that both undergraduate and postgraduate students generally view AI favourably (Chan & Hu, 2023). Specifically, it was found that these students acknowledge AI's potential to enhance educational experiences. This finding aligns with research indicating widespread optimism towards AI among younger populations (Zhang & Dafoe, 2019). The authors further suggest that individuals with higher educational backgrounds, particularly those applying for white-collar jobs, hold positive perceptions of the technology. As outlined in Section 2.2.1, which focuses on employer attractiveness in relation to emerging business trends, it has been demonstrated that companies engaging in innovative activities tend to enhance their appeal to job seekers. Since digital technologies like AI

represent recent innovations (Parasuraman, 2000), this trend will likely apply to companies incorporating AI. Furthermore, Terjesen et al. (2007) discovered that a “dynamic and forward-looking business approach” (p. 504) is one of the top five criteria that students consider when evaluating the attractiveness of employers. This indicates that organisations actively engaging in AI are likely to be seen as embodying a dynamic and forward-looking approach, making them more attractive to potential employees.

Other research, such as that conducted by Wang et al. (2022), suggests that a company’s engagement with AI might decrease its appeal as an employer, primarily because of the prevalent AI anxiety among students. AI anxiety is defined as the general fear or unease about uncontrollable AI developments (Johnson & Verdicchio, 2017). This anxiety is more significant with AI than traditional computer anxiety due to AI’s capabilities to mimic human behaviour, operate autonomously, and self-improve (Clarke, 2019; Li & Huang, 2020). Additionally, learning anxiety, emerging from doubts about one’s ability to understand complex topics such as AI algorithms, can lead students to question the value and enjoyment of learning about AI (Wang et al., 2022). Another concern, the fear of job displacement due to AI advancements, has also been shown to cause anxiety (Cohen & Jones, 2020; Wang et al., 2022). Interestingly, this fear has been shown sometimes to motivate individuals to learn more about AI, paradoxically increasing the attractiveness of companies engaging in AI. Conversely, the negative emotions linked to these anxieties can also lead to behaviours like avoidance or reduced interaction with new technologies (Khasawneh, 2018), which may make companies that engage in AI less appealing to job seekers. However, research also suggests AI anxiety can be reduced if companies foster a culture of learning and growth with strong support from leaders (Bankins et al., 2023).

2.4 Research Gap

Although extensive research has been conducted on perceptions of AI, what influences employer attractiveness, and the role of EB communication, there is a gap in the literature where these three areas intersect (Figure 1). Specifically, as far as the authors are aware, there is no literature currently exploring the perceptions of communication about AI in EB and what factors influence such communication in terms of employer attractiveness. Hence, this current study seeks to enrich the existing literature by conducting research at the intersection of these three research areas.

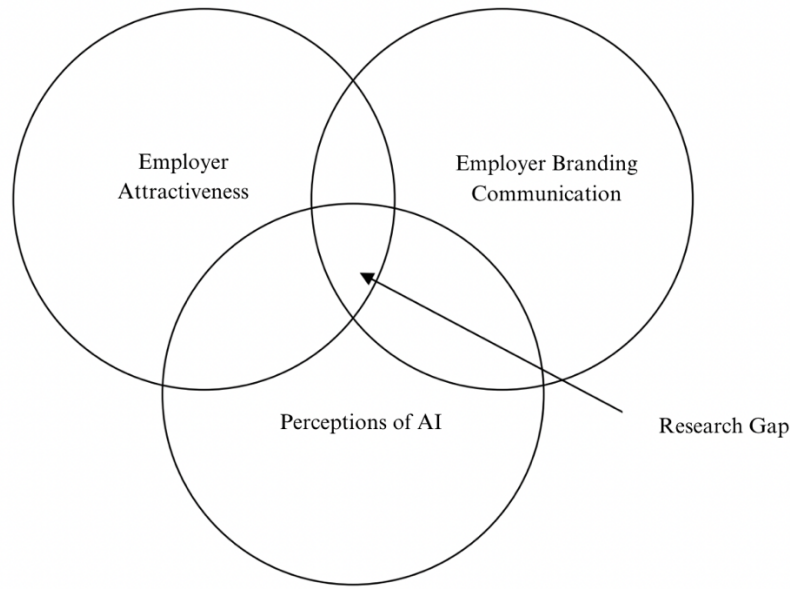


Figure 1: The Identified Research Gap

The authors argue that addressing the research gap is necessary, as it has been shown that an increasing number of companies are integrating AI into their external communications and EB, yet there is limited research available to guide them on how to manage such communications effectively. As suggested by previous literature and underscored by the introductory quotes, there are conflicting perceptions regarding communication about AI in the EB context, further emphasising the importance of this study in understanding these perceptions among job seekers and companies.

2.5 Signalling Theory as a Theoretical Lens

Signalling theory, originating from Spence (1973), serves as the foundation for understanding how information asymmetry shapes interactions in the job market. Job seekers, facing limited information about potential employers, rely on signals like guarantees, pricing, and brand reputation to assess quality (Dawar & Parker, 1994; Koku, 1995). Conversely, organisations strategically leverage their reputation, initiatives, and branding as tools to attract talent, acknowledging how these signals influence job seekers' perceptions and decision-making processes (Connelly et al., 2011; Dauth et al., 2023; Taj, 2016; Wilden et al., 2010).

Employing a signalling theory lens in this current study presents two main advantages. First, it enables a detailed analysis of explicit and implicit content in EB communications, identifying strategic signals that otherwise might go unnoticed. Second, it enhances understanding of the intentions behind the communication about AI, revealing subtle tactics firms employ to position themselves in the job market. Signalling theory thus provides critical insights into the subtle dynamics of EB communications, revealing how they shape job seekers' perceptions and influence their decision-making processes, aspects that might be overlooked without this theoretical lens.

2.5.1 The Signalling Environment

The signalling environment (Figure 2) comprises four principal components in signalling theory. These include the *signaller* and *the receiver*, the *signal* itself, and the feedback from the receiver to the signaller regarding the signal's effectiveness, also known as *countersignals* (Connelly et al., 2011). The subsequent sections will elaborate on each element.

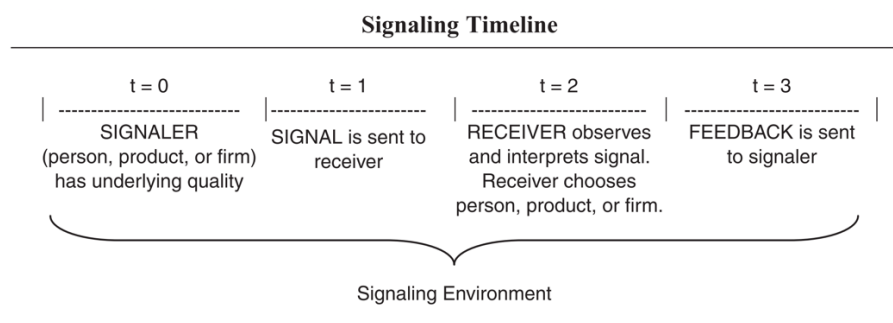


Figure 2: The Signalling Timeline in the Signalling Environment (Connelly et al., 2011)

Signallers are actors that hold crucial, non-visible information, which they communicate through observable actions to influence perceptions and shape decisions (Connelly et al., 2011). This is apparent in job market settings, where organisations must communicate their culture, work environment, and ethics to overcome information asymmetry. According to the theory, organisations are categorised as high- or low-quality signallers based on their unobservable capabilities to meet outsider expectations. In this context, *quality* reflects a company's reputation and prestige, revealing the depth of the signaller's hidden abilities (Connelly et al., 2011).

Signals are observable actions or attributes signallers use to convey an organisation's positive qualities and underlying strengths that are not directly visible to outsiders (Connelly et al., 2011). In the job market, organisations signal tangible and intangible aspects, such as compensation and employee welfare, to influence job seekers' decision-making (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Turban & Greening, 1997; Wanous et al., 1992). The effectiveness of signals is influenced by several key factors, including their costliness, honesty, and consistency. *Signal cost* refers to the involved expense that underpins its credibility, ensuring that only those genuinely possessing the advertised qualities can afford to send it (Connelly et al., 2011). Although high costs typically discourage low-quality firms, a signaller might still engage in false signalling if the perceived benefits exceed these costs (Connelly et al., 2011). *Signal honesty* indicates the extent to which a signal truthfully represents the signaller's actual qualities, affecting the receiver's trust and subsequent response (Durcikova & Gray, 2009). Furthermore, *signal consistency* is the coherence among various signals from the same source (Gao et al., 2008). By consistently presenting unified messages, a firm can prevent misinterpretations, enhance its distinctiveness, and reduce information asymmetry, which ensures effective and reliable communication even in dynamic environments (Balboa & Martí, 2007; Janney & Folta, 2003).

Receivers are actors who, lacking specific information about an entity but desiring it, observe and react to the signals sent by signallers (Connelly et al., 2011). In the job market context, job seekers respond to the signals from organisations by making decisions regarding job applications or job offers (Connelly et al., 2011). The effectiveness of signalling depends on, besides the previously mentioned factors, the receiver's characteristics, such as their attention and interpretation. *Receiver attention* involves the extent to which the receiver actively seeks out signals, which is essential for the signalling process (Connelly et al., 2011). Furthermore, *receiver interpretation* refers to how receivers perceive and attribute meaning to signals, which depends on the receivers' unique perspectives and priorities (Branzei et al., 2004; Ehrhart & Ziegert, 2005).

Countersignals are responses from receivers to signallers. They play a crucial role in improving the efficiency of the signalling process by providing signallers with feedback on signal reliability, the level of receiver engagement, and how the signals are interpreted (Gulati & Higgins, 2003). This feedback loop addresses information asymmetry in both directions,

allowing signallers to adapt future strategies for improved reliability and effectiveness (Srivastava, 2001).

2.5.2 Signalling in Employer Branding

Wilden et al. (2010) expand on the signalling theory, proposing that the effectiveness of a brand signal in attracting job seekers depends on clarity, credibility, consistency, and brand investment. Clarity in communicating the employer brand involves straightforward and unambiguous messaging that gives job seekers a clear and credible company image, reducing their need to interpret messages and lowering information costs (Erdem & Swait, 1998). Credibility concerns the trustworthiness of the employer brand and the organisation's ability to fulfil its promises (Erdem & Swait, 1998; Hoeffler & Keller, 2002). It is based on potential employees' assessments of the employer's honesty and reliability, affecting their perceived risk of joining the company (Wilden et al., 2010). Consistency entails aligning brand signals with the organisation's goals and maintaining these signals over time (Erdem & Swait, 1998; Park et al., 1986), reducing confusion and information costs, thereby enhancing credibility (Wilden et al., 2010). Investment in the brand refers to the organisation's dedication to its branding efforts (Dawar, 1998), with greater investments signalling a stronger commitment to the employment opportunities and overall job experience it offers. (Wilden et al., 2010). Collectively, these elements lower perceived risks and information costs for job seekers, thereby enhancing the employer's attractiveness by improving the perceived quality of job opportunities (Wilden et al., 2010).

3. Method

This chapter focuses on the study's methodological underpinnings. It outlines the Research Philosophy (3.1), delves into the Research Approach and Design (3.2), and details the Data Collection (3.3). The Methodology for Data Analysis is presented in (3.4), followed by a thorough examination of the Quality of the Study (3.5) and the Ethical Considerations (3.6).

3.1 Research Philosophy

Since a key aim of the study was to uncover the perceptions of job seekers and companies regarding communication about AI within an EB context, a constructionist ontology was adopted. Such a position entails that social phenomena studied are “made real” by the activities of humans and the meanings which the observers attach to them (Bell et al., 2019). According to Lee (2012), adopting a constructionist ontology is often associated with a qualitative research approach, as in this current study. Additionally, the choice of ontology for this study was considered appropriate since it focuses on exploring how different participants construct their realities and how these constructions shape their perceptions and behaviours (Bell et al., 2019). Furthermore, regarding epistemology, an interpretivist approach was taken. This perspective stresses the “understanding of the social world through an examination of the interpretation of that world by its participants” (Bell et al., 2019, p. 356). Accordingly, the authors attempt to take this perspective as this current study involves understanding complex, context-dependent human perceptions of where the meanings and interpretations of the participants are crucial.

In line with the interpretivist perspective, a qualitative research method was adopted for the study (Bell et al., 2019). This choice was underpinned by the recognition, as established in the second chapter, that AI in the EB context has not been extensively explored, justifying a qualitative approach suitable for this ambiguous research field (Edmondson & Mcmanus, 2007). Additionally, the aim to understand the nuanced perceptions and experiences of the participants necessitated a qualitative research method, as quantitative measures would be inadequate to capture such intricacies (Arsel, 2017; Bell et al., 2019; Daft, 1983).

3.2 Research Approach and Design

In coherence with the interpretivist and constructionist philosophy previously articulated, this study employed a cross-sectional design (Arbnor & Bjerke, 1997). A cross-sectional design, which collects participant data at a single point in time, is particularly suitable for exploratory studies (Bell et al., 2019). Consequently, this design was well-suited for the exploratory nature of this study, which examines the undiscovered field of communication about AI in EB. Additionally, the design efficiently captures a comprehensive snapshot of current perceptions, accurately reflecting the views of job seekers and companies at the time of the study, free from the effects of temporal changes.

The study initially adopted an inductive approach, starting with observations to derive broader generalisations directly from data patterns, having no pre-existing theories in mind (Bell et al., 2019; Gill & Johnson, 2010). This method was especially suitable for this study due to its exploratory nature, facilitating a genuine openness that led to discovering unexpected insights in the respondents' responses (Gioia et al., 2013). Following this, the research evolved to adopt more of an abductive approach, integrating inductive and deductive methodologies, enabling an iterative dialogue between theory and data (Andersen, 1998). For instance, after gathering a substantial amount of data, the authors noticed that many interpretations aligned with the concepts of sending and receiving signals. This observation led the authors to explore signalling theory further as a suitable theoretical lens for deeper analysis. This abductive approach allowed the authors to leverage the exploratory benefits of inductive research while concurrently engaging with relevant existing literature to address the research question (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). For example, when interviewees expressed various concerns related to AI, the authors recognised the need to further explore the concept of AI anxiety in existing literature, incorporating these findings into the literature review and considering them during the analysis.

3.3 Data Collection

3.3.1 Preparatory Work

Background research was conducted prior to the main study, where the author sought a comprehensive understanding of the topic and validation of initial assumptions. Additionally, observations and a pilot study were carried out as part of the preparatory work. These steps

were crucial for refining the research design and objectives, setting the stage for the interviews in the main study.

3.3.1.1 Background Research

Before beginning the main study, the authors sought to understand how companies communicate about AI in their EB more deeply. An initial review was conducted to achieve this, concentrating on sources such as LinkedIn, company websites, and other EB platforms such as Instagram and internal Facebook groups. This review aimed to confirm the accuracy of the author's initial assumption that communicating about AI has become a prevalent practice among companies today. This assumption stemmed from the authors' experiences during their job application process, where they were surprised by the extensive amount of EB communication that included content about AI.

The results from this background research somewhat confirmed the assumption, showing that in just one week of January 2024, every company from MBB and the Big Four, mentioned AI in their external communications (Appendix A). Although most of this communication could be seen as client-oriented, certain efforts, such as communicating AI-related student events (Appendix B), clearly were aimed at job seekers. This finding, revealing the widespread use of such communication among management consultancies, redirected the study's focus towards this sector.

3.3.1.2 Observations

To enhance the understanding of the phenomenon and gather contextual insights before formulating the interview guide for the main study, research observation was conducted at the Handelsdagarna student fair hosted by the Stockholm School of Economics. This event attracts significant participation from leading management consultancy firms. Adopting an observer-as-participant role and engaging with the consultancies without disclosing research objectives made it possible to take detailed field notes (Bell et al., 2019) (Appendix C). This method provided a unique lens to examine whether and how these companies incorporate the topic of AI into their discussions with job seekers.

Observations at the fair served as a great foundation before creating the interview guide, as it revealed variance in how and the extent to which companies addressed AI. For example, certain firms emphasised AI's drawbacks and potential risks, an angle previously unconsidered by the

authors. Another interesting yet previously overlooked perspective was that company representatives began focusing on internal communication about AI early in the discussions. These findings, among others, were pivotal in formulating the interview guide. For example, the authors included questions in the interview guide about companies' views on how job seekers perceive communication about AI, especially regarding discussions on risks and challenges. Additionally, the interview guides incorporated questions that prompted participants to elaborate on their views concerning companies' internal communications about AI. The decision to include these elements in the guide was based on their emergence as significant themes from the observations. Consequently, this preparatory work proved highly valuable as it formulated more relevant and thorough questions from the outset, allowing for a more detailed examination of the topics (Bell et al., 2019).

3.3.1.3 Pilot Study

In addition to the main study interviews, two pilot studies were conducted separately: one with a job seeker and the other with a company representative (Table 1). This preliminary step assessed the guide's comprehensibility and ability to capture the research questions using a representative group of this study's sample (Malmqvist et al., 2019; van Teijlingen & Vanora Hundley, 2001). Each pilot interview lasted about 40 minutes and revealed flaws in the interview format and guide. For example, respondents misinterpreted the meaning of *AI communication*, interpreting it as using AI as a tool in communication efforts. Based on the feedback received, questions were rephrased to focus specifically on *communication about AI*, thereby enhancing clarity and restricting responses within the study's scope, which paved the way for richer data collection in the main interviews (Bell et al., 2019).

Interview	Sample group	Background	Age	Gender	Date	Length
P1	Job seeker	MSc in Business & Management at SSE	25	Female	2024-02-15	39:38
P2	Company	Senior Associate & Employer Branding	31	Male	2024-02-12	42:15

Table 1: Pilot Study Participants

3.3.2 Main Study

3.3.2.1 Sampling and Selection

As this study is exploratory, purposive sampling was chosen to elicit rich and interesting data from participants who were well-suited to discuss the research topic (Bell et al., 2019; Taherdoost, 2016). Given the nascent stage of communication about AI in EB, this sampling approach was particularly relevant, as it allowed for gathering nuanced data from companies engaging in communication about AI and the job seekers they aimed to target.

To capture perceptions of such communications, accurate data collection required collecting data from companies that had incorporated communication about AI into their EB efforts. Background research indicated that management consultancies engaged in this type of communication, leading the authors to focus on this sector and individuals seeking employment within these companies. The sample comprised two distinct groups: companies and job seekers. The interplay between these actors' perceptions, the lens of those actively shaping and those targeted by EB efforts, offered a nuanced view of the perceptions in this nascent domain. The study included interviews with 29 participants, comprising nine company representatives (aged 25-49) and 20 job seekers (aged 22-29). The sample composition, with a more significant proportion of job seekers than company representatives, was chosen due to the substantial number of job seekers in the population pool targeted by management consultancies. More information about the participants is detailed in Appendix D and E.

The sample of job seekers was selected using a criterion sampling method to ensure that participants were relevant (Bell et al., 2019). This entailed being a Swedish master's degree student in business or industrial engineering from a higher educational institute. These criteria were chosen as these are the type of job seekers that consultancies mainly seek to hire and thus target with their EB efforts (Loos, 2023). The study sampled participants across gender, program specialisations, and higher education institutes to ensure diversity within the targeted research scope. While not every respondent in this sample had directly been exposed to EB communication about AI, including them in the sample revealed valuable insights into their viewpoints and expectations on the study subject.

Regarding the company sample, the initial intent was to select only management consulting firms actively highlighting AI in their EB communications to delve deeper into the reasons

behind such a decision. However, some of these firms declined to participate, citing confidentiality concerns. Consequently, the sampling criteria were expanded to include management consulting firms that communicated about AI more broadly to an external audience, though not always explicitly targeting job seekers. This expanded sample provided a more diverse perspective on communication about AI, enhancing the study's breadth and depth. Criterion sampling was thus employed to select individuals working in the Swedish job market whose professional responsibilities included EB activities within management consulting firms, ensuring that their insights were directly aligned with the study focal points. Ultimately, the company sample consisted of participants from eight different management consultancy firms. The authors acknowledge that the selected individuals' views may not represent the ones of their entire companies and that not all respondents had extensive experience with communication about AI in their EB. However, their discussions provided valuable insights into their perspectives and expectations regarding the study's topic.

3.3.2.2 Interview Process

The study employed semi-structured interviews for data collection to comprehensively understand the perceptions of communication about AI in EB among job seekers and companies. This methodological choice was deliberately aligned with the need to explore the open-ended and nuanced nature of the research inquiry, allowing for rich qualitative data collection (Edmondson & Mcmanus, 2007). Semi-structured interviews afforded the necessary flexibility for an in-depth exploration of individual perceptions and responsive interviewing. This format facilitated the collection of interviewees' interpretations of their experiences, which was valuable for this study's exploratory aim of understanding the participants' perceptions (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

Of the study's interviews, 25 were conducted via Google Meet, and three were in person. While acknowledging potential challenges in interpreting non-verbal communication during video interviews, research by Irani (2018) suggests minimal differences between face-to-face and video interviews. Consequently, Google Meet was seen as an appropriate platform for the interviews as it offered a balance between convenience and the capacity to observe non-verbal cues (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Each interview began informally with small talk, such as asking respondents how they were doing, to build connection and trust, fostering a more conversational exchange, as Rubin and Rubin (2011) advise. The interviews lasted between 37

to 62 minutes and were guided by distinct interview guides for the job seeker and company samples (Appendix F & G). Although the interview guides were similar in their aim to uncover underlying perceptions of communication about AI, they somewhat diverged in focus, with i.e. the company interview guide specifically including questions about the rationale for incorporating AI into EB communication.

The interviews had a flexible and responsive dialogue driven by the interviewees, as semi-structured interviews allow (Bell et al., 2019). This format enabled interviewers to delve deeper into the subject matter, facilitating follow-up questions that emerged naturally from the initial responses (Dilley, 2004). Active listening was crucial during the interviews, facilitating responsive questioning and a deep understanding of both verbal and non-verbal cues. This method, known as responsive interviewing (Rubin & Rubin, 2005), enhanced the quality of the interview process. For example, by observing emotional cues in the respondents' answers, the authors could delve deeper into their questions. For instance, when a company representative (C7) used the word “unfortunately” in discussing their company’s limited use of AI in EB communications, it prompted the interviewers to ask more detailed questions about the feelings and reasons behind this sentiment.

Recognising the importance of allowing interviewees to express themselves freely, they were given the choice to speak in English or Swedish, thereby minimising language barriers in line with Baumgartner’s (2012) recommendations. Consequently, one interview was conducted in English, with the rest in Swedish. While potentially complicating the translation of direct quotes, this approach was essential to facilitate accurate expression and understanding among the participants (Feldermann & Hiebl, 2020).

After completing 26 interviews, no new thematic codes emerged, leading to the decision to conduct three additional interviews to confirm data saturation, as recommended by Bell et al. (2019) and Hennink et al. (2017). Since the study aimed to gather specific individual perceptions instead of establishing widely generalizable conclusions, data collection was discontinued when saturation was reached.

3.4 Methodology for Data Analysis

After the interviews were conducted, each was transcribed using the AI-powered transcription tool Klang.ai. This tool efficiently transcribed the interviews within 24 hours, ensuring the accuracy of participant statements while fully complying with GDPR (Appendix H). Subsequently, the software ATLAS.ti was employed to assist with the coding, recoding, and secure data storage (Gibbs, 2007). The method for data analysis in this study draws inspiration from the thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is a methodological approach that aids in identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data (Bell et al., 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is widely recognised for its versatility and relevance in exploratory research settings, making it particularly appropriate for this study’s exploratory objectives of examining perceptions of communication about AI in EB. The approach includes a systematic six-stage data collection and analysis process, as depicted in Figure 3.

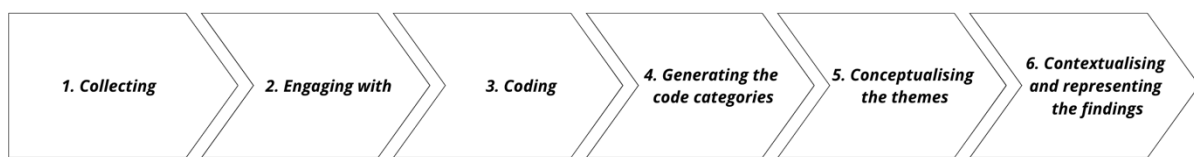


Figure 3: The Six-stage Process of Data Collection and Analysis According to Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Once all data was integrated into ATLAS.ti, both authors familiarised themselves with the content by independently reviewing the transcriptions and interview notes. This initial review was critical to fully understanding the data and correcting any potential inaccuracies introduced by the transcription software. Subsequently, the authors independently coded the transcripts, regularly discussing and resolving differences in their interpretations to ensure a unified understanding of the data (Bell et al., 2019). During this process, the coding scheme was refined by eliminating redundancies and reducing the number of codes from 313 to 163 meaningful code categories. For example, expressions like “AI is exciting” and “AI is fun” were merged into a single category, “Positive AI attitude”, to capture the overarching sentiment more effectively.

Subsequently, 19 themes were derived from the data patterns based on empirical data rather than theory. This approach enabled the authors to uncover previously unexplored aspects of communication about AI in EB that existing theories had not addressed. The final phase

involved formulating five theme categories: company representatives' perceptions of communication about AI, job seekers' perceptions of communication about AI, job seekers' preferences on communication about AI, company characteristics influencing perceptions of communication about AI, and individual characteristics influencing perceptions of communication about AI. These categories helped contextualise and comprehensively explain the analysed data regarding the research questions. Figure 4 illustrates examples of the coding and data analysis process.

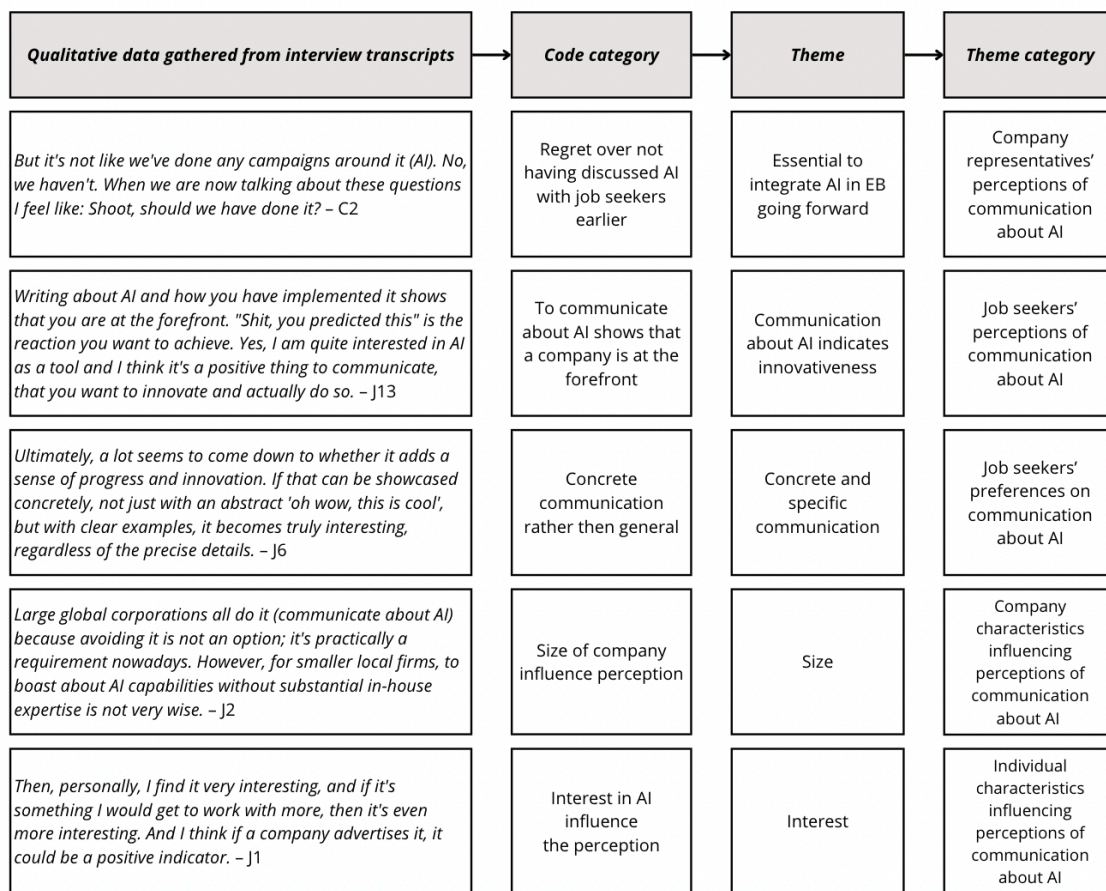


Figure 4: Example of the Coding and Data Analysis Process

In the latter stages of data analysis, after substantial data collection, the authors discovered that many interpretations were consistent with the concepts of sending and receiving signals. This finding prompted further investigation into signalling theory as a theoretical lens to enhance the analysis of the empirical data. Although signalling theory did not significantly influence the data analysis process or the development of the final theme categories, it provided a valuable perspective for the authors to interpret the empirical findings throughout the research process.

3.5 Quality of Study

To uphold integrity and credibility in the data collection and analysis, the research strategy involved following established qualitative research standards. Although reliability and validity are essential benchmarks for research quality, they are more relevant to quantitative studies, focusing on measurability (Bell et al., 2019). Moreover, these concepts rest on a singular, objective reality. Consequently, the quality assessment shifted towards trustworthiness, employing Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework with its four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

3.5.1 Credibility

Ensuring the study's credibility was crucial when exploring communication about AI in EB through human perceptions. Credibility is the extent to which the research accurately reflects the participants' reality and their perception of the interpretations as believable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Three key strategies were employed to achieve credibility. Firstly, researcher triangulation was used, involving both authors in all interviews, allowing for collaborative refinement of interpretations and minimised biases (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). For example, alternating roles between note-taker and interviewer from one session to the following enhanced the interviews with fresh perspectives and balanced data interpretation (Bechhofer et al., 1984; Eisenhardt, 1989). The flexibility also allowed the note-taker to ask follow-up questions overlooked by the interviewer, enriching the data set (Velardo & Elliott, 2021). Secondly, member checking was conducted to validate and affirm all quotes included in the final study with the participants, ensuring the accuracy of the statements as representations of their shared experiences (Bell et al., 2019). Lastly, pilot interviews were conducted with a job seeker and a company representative to test and refine the interview guides. This step enhanced the study's credibility by ensuring the data collection methods were robust and effective (Srinivasan & Lohith, 2017).

3.5.2 Transferability

Transferability refers to whether the research is generalisable and representative of other contexts or situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative research often avoids broad empirical generalisation, focusing instead on the contextual uniqueness and significance of aspects within the social world (Bell et al., 2019), as demonstrated by this study. To enhance transferability, the study offers detailed thick descriptions of the empirical setting,

incorporating around 40 carefully selected profound and richly detailed quotes. Furthermore, the study is transparent about the research process and systematic analysis by giving a detailed description of, for example, the interview process, enabling others to assess the applicability of the theoretical findings by comparing context similarities (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The study's boundaries are also clearly defined in the background, making the context understandable (Shenton, 2004). However, the authors acknowledge the dynamic and evolving nature of AI technology, recognising that such changes could impact the transferability of the findings as technology advances.

3.5.3 Dependability

In quantitative research, reliability relates to the consistency of a study's outcomes under repeated conditions, aiming for replicable results (Bell et al., 2019). Guba and Lincoln (1985) introduce the concept of dependability for qualitative research, which parallels reliability but emphasises the need for a comprehensive audit of the research process. For example, this study included a detailed project plan covering all stages and a comprehensive Excel document outlining participant details, authors' outreach efforts, interview dates, and contact information. In adherence to these principles, thorough attention was given to the quality of data collection, with all interviews being systematically recorded, transcribed, and organised. Furthermore, consistent communication was maintained between the authors, engaging in discussions at least every other evening during the data collection phase, aligning with the recommendations of Lincoln and Guba (1985).

3.5.4 Conformability

Ensuring the study's trustworthiness necessitates examining its confirmability. It assesses how other researchers can verify the findings and the efforts to minimise theoretical or personal biases in data collection, interpretation, and analysis (Bell et al., 2019). Acknowledging that absolute objectivity is unattainable in business research, the emphasis shifts towards maximising the confirmability of data to improve quality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Efforts to achieve this included practising reflexivity, where the role of the authors was critically evaluated to understand its impact on the study. Reflexivity was particularly relevant as the authors, while actively seeking jobs, frequently analysed EB content, potentially influencing their perspectives.

Additionally, the authors' familiarity with several interviewees from SSE in the job seeker sample could compromise conformability. To address this concern, researcher triangulation was employed, with both researchers participating in interviews and independently coding data before jointly comparing and discussing it, thereby reducing the risk of biased interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The authors also committed to documenting their theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices throughout the study. This transparency aimed to clarify the decision-making processes, further enhancing the study's confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.6 Ethical Considerations

A primary ethical consideration for this study involved guaranteeing the anonymity of both the companies and the participants. Accordingly, individual names and company names were anonymised. Data security was also a priority, with audio materials securely stored in cloud-based servers and strict compliance with GDPR ensuring the deletion of recordings after transcription. Additionally, all participants received a GDPR document (Appendix H) detailing their rights concerning personal data, which required their signature for validation. Informed consent was another vital ethical consideration. Participants were made aware of their right to withdraw at any time and provided consent prior to the interviews, being fully informed about the recording process and the study's nature.

4. Empirical Findings

The study explored how job seekers and companies perceive communication about AI within an EB context. Additionally, the study sought to identify the factors that influence job seekers' perceptions of communication about AI in terms of employer attractiveness. Interviews with job seekers and company representatives identified 19 themes organised into five theme categories. The first two theme categories presented in this section, Company Representatives' Perceptions of Communication about AI (4.1) and Job Seekers' Perceptions of Communication about AI (4.2), address the initial research question. The following three theme categories, Job Seekers' Preferences on Communication about AI (4.3), Company Characteristics Influencing Perceptions of Communication about AI (4.4) and Individual Characteristics Influencing Perceptions of Communication about AI (4.5), aim to answer the second research question by identifying the factors that influence job seekers' perceptions of communication about AI in terms of employer attractiveness.

4.1 Company Representatives' Perceptions of Communication about AI

This theme category encompasses five themes, each offering insights into how companies perceive communication about AI in the EB context. Hence, insight in this section is only derived from interviews with the company representatives.

4.1.1 High AI Enthusiasm Internally

Company representatives' opinions on internal engagement and communication about AI provide valuable insights into their perceptions of communication about AI within the EB context. Many participants highlighted a significant internal enthusiasm for AI within the company. Numerous respondents pointed out moments of heightened excitement, such as introducing new AI features or rolling out AI-related courses within the company, as illustrative examples of this enthusiasm.

I think AI is definitely one of the bigger things right now [internally]. So, we have a lot of different classes on prompt engineering and general AI courses on how you can boost your productivity as a consultant. (...) And that's also something that's introduced to newcomers, but it also really excites people already working here. – C5

Interestingly, it was noted that when AI-related information was shared with employees, they actively distributed it throughout the company. The company representatives frequently underscored that the internal sense of pride was a reason for the active spread of communication regarding AI.

When we launched it [internal ChatGPT-tool], it was a huge branding thing internally. Because it significantly eased the burden on the consultants, really a lot. So the internal communication caused a spread among the workers. And yes, they felt that, shoot, it is pretty nice to work for a big company instead of a company that has 100 people. – C3

4.1.2 AI as a Hygiene Factor

Additional insights were derived from company representatives' discussions on the prospective role of AI within their company and its implications for external communication. A consensus among participants indicated a belief in AI's pivotal role in the future. Furthermore, a vast majority indicated their belief that communication about AI will intensify in the upcoming years. Some participants expressed their ambition to be at the forefront, aiming not just to utilise AI but also to showcase their AI capabilities to external parties.

We've gotten the realisation that AI is here to stay. So it's something we want to be at the forefront of both using it and showing that we have capabilities within. (...) I think we are in a quite fast-moving industry, and this is a super fast-moving space, and it's super important to already go ahead and follow it from the beginning. Otherwise, you'll get behind. – C5

The company representatives' view on the future of AI can be further interpreted by examining their articulated necessity for hiring individuals possessing AI competencies. Numerous participants highlighted their current and prospective emphasis on seeking candidates demonstrating AI skills or interest in AI throughout the recruitment process.

I think something we have in mind now when we recruit is that it is a competence that we are looking for, i.e. that you have previous experience with some type of AI or show interest in it – C6

Beyond merely discussing its importance for the future, several participants highlighted that incorporating AI into company operations will be viewed as a foundational requirement, akin to a hygiene factor, something indispensable for a company even to be considered relevant. Similarly, a few participants drew parallels with the evolution of the sustainability trend, illustrating how what once was a trend has now become a fundamental expectation.

I think there will be a lot of talk about it [AI] this year, what we did before that, and so on. Then I think, like how sustainability has become now, it's some kind of hygiene factor going forward. You have to use AI; otherwise, people don't want to work there.

– C2

4.1.3 AI Holds an Attractive Appeal

Company representatives agreed that workplaces integrating AI are generally viewed as appealing by job seekers. Specifically, they emphasised that this appeal might be particularly pronounced among certain groups of individuals, such as the younger generation and individuals with a keen interest in innovation and technology.

I think it [AI] is very attractive, especially for younger generations who are interested in technology and innovation, to see that there are opportunities to work on this with us and that we encourage this kind of learning and development, is truly attractive. –

C1

A few participants reported observing evidence of the growing interest in AI, as reflected by the increasing number of questions about AI and company capabilities in this area during student events, such as career fairs. Moreover, they anticipated an even greater surge in questions about AI in the near future, attributing this expectation to the rapid advancement of the technology.

We get increasingly more questions about AI, both within the company, but also about our capabilities when we are out there [student fairs]. So that is getting bigger and bigger. (...) And I expect us to get a lot more questions about it [AI] when we go there [at a student fair] now in the spring. – C5

4.1.4 Lack of Consideration of AI in EB

In exploring the extent to which companies have integrated AI into their communication strategies within EB, it became evident that only a select few had considered or actively incorporated it (e.g., conducted an AI event for students – C1). Conversely, the majority indicated a lack of engagement with AI in the context of EB, noting that they had neither undertaken any AI-related activities nor given it substantial thought. However, numerous company representatives recognised that AI had been integrated into communications with other stakeholders, encompassing internal dialogues and client interactions.

We have probably primarily focused on using it [communication about AI] to attract customers. That's where our focus has been so far. – C4

Not that I know of, actually. We have done it [communicated about AI], but with our internal AI tool, which is more for our internal work than actual employer branding. No, unfortunately, I don't really think it [the company] has come that far with it. – C7

4.1.5 Essential to Integrate AI in EB Going Forward

As stated above, most companies in the sample had already communicated about AI internally and to clients. The fact that AI had yet to be included in their previous EB communications was attributed to their lack of consideration for it. However, most expressed regret over not having thought about it sooner.

It's not like we've done any campaigns around it [AI]. No, we haven't. Now that we are talking about these questions, I feel like, shoot, should we have done it – C2

Furthermore, most of the participants who acknowledge a lack of inclusion of AI in today's EB communication mentioned a keen interest in adopting it moving forward, illustrated by the quotes below:

Yes, well, it's because it's a bit like the future is AI, and everything is affected by it. So, it should be apparent, like we should have it (...) For example, at a fair, when students ask: What do you do at [Company name]? How do we differentiate ourselves? Then we can bring up AI more often. That is really good, I will do that. – C7

Of course we will promote things, promote projects we will do in AI in the future. We will definitely do that. If we take events at schools, we have used our own AI tool for students to sit and try out. So, I think such things will come more and more. – C2

Lastly, some participants went a step further and underscored the crucial role of AI as a key differentiator in EB strategies. They identified AI not merely as an added feature but as a pivotal element synonymous with other core company values.

But I don't see why we couldn't do it also for employer branding purposes going forward. (...) Yes, it [AI] has to be part of our message. What we have mainly emphasised throughout my time at [Company name] is around leadership. I think that will continue to be important going forward. But the fact that we are a player to be reckoned with when it comes to working with issues related to AI, I think that will definitely be a dealbreaker in the future as well. – C4

4.2 Job Seekers' Perceptions of Communication about AI

This theme category encompasses six themes, each offering insights into how job seekers perceive communication about AI in the EB context. Hence, insights in this section are only derived from interviews with the job seekers.

4.2.1 Uncertain about AI's Influence on Work

During the interviews with job seekers, various factors emerged that influenced their views and feelings about AI, including the uncertainties it presents. A common concern among participants was the potential impact of AI on employment, specifically the fear of job displacement. Furthermore, there was curiosity and concern about how AI could transform their methodologies in a consultancy setting.

What do I really hope will happen now? Now that I'm about to start working. How will it change my work? I have an idea, but I don't think you can prepare for it. What happens now with Co-pilot? How much will it change the profession of consultant? Will I risk not having my job in August? – J15

4.2.2 AI as an Exciting and Useful Tool

A significant majority of participants described their feelings towards AI using terms such as “fun” and “exciting”. Additionally, many emphasised that it is perceived as “cool” when a company actively engages with AI, also suggesting that this sentiment is likely shared among other job seekers.

I think AI is really a hot topic. Many people are interested in it at the university. I do see the value for companies in communicating how they are working with it [AI] and how they are doing it because I think it will attract many students. (...) I've gotten into AI now during my studies a bit. It's exciting and fun. And if someone [a company] does something with it that I find exciting. It's very nice. – J18

Participants also discussed the perceived advantages of utilising AI at their future workplaces. The overwhelming consensus was that AI is a valuable asset that could significantly simplify daylily tasks. Further, they articulated that having the capability to employ AI in the workplace offers a distinct advantage over lacking such ability.

It [AI] can simplify many things. Especially boring tasks that are more routine. So, it is definitely interesting to involve AI in my future work. I only see it as an advantage that you could use it. – J6

4.2.3 AI Beneficial for Career Development

Another pattern that emerged involved the participants acknowledging the role of AI in transforming the future of work. They viewed their engagement with AI as an opportunity to stay relevant in the job market, noting that increased knowledge about the technology could lead to better career prospects in the future.

The more you know [about AI], the more value you will have in a labour market and be able to have a nice and wonderful career that makes you happy – J6

4.2.4 Sceptic towards EB Communication

Another pattern apparent among the job seekers was a general scepticism toward company communications aimed at attracting talent, i.e. EB communication. Several indicated that they distrusted these communications and instead turned to alternative sources for information, such as company employees not engaged in recruitment, to assess the attractiveness of the workplace.

I wouldn't say that I blindly trust what they [companies] say on the website, and certainly not at company events, either. I think it's mainly when you talk to someone from the company. And preferably a person who works there but is not a part of the recruitment process, then it also feels like they might be a little more honest. – J17

Building on these discussions, job seekers recalled instances where their perceptions of reality about a company diverged from the company's claims. Sustainability and work-life balance were two areas frequently mentioned where discrepancies were noted.

I think that students, like myself, are quite used to being somewhat critical of sources. For example, when companies come to us and say: Yes, we're definitely working with work-life balance. And you know that they work 70 hours a week. Then you are a bit like this: okay, you work with work-life balance. Great that you say that, but you probably don't do it. And I think it's the same with AI. – J20

As expressed by participant J20, some participants' scepticism extended to AI, questioning whether companies' claims about AI might face similar doubts. The following section will further elaborate on the job seekers' view of AI in communication.

4.2.5 Sceptic towards AI Claims

A majority of job seekers described AI as a “buzzword”, indicating that it is frequently discussed, not because of its actual value, but because there's a perceived obligation to mention it. They suggested that the discourse around AI is driven by its popularity and the pressure to stay relevant rather than a genuine integration or understanding.

If you say AI, I think buzzword. (...) Many people talk about AI all the time. You almost get a little tired of everyone talking about how good they are at AI. It feels like there

are a lot of words, especially linked to AI. I think it's easy to get caught up in talking about AI just because. – J19

Expanding on the theme of job seekers' scepticism towards company communications, several participants drew an analogy between greenwashing and the use of AI in communication. A few even mentioned the concept of "AI-washing" in the discussions. They expressed the view that companies often leverage AI to appear progressive and innovative without possessing the necessary substantiation for such claims.

It's like anything else, it's a trend. Is there such a thing as AI-washing? I'm sure there is. It's a bit like greenwashing I suppose. You want to show how progressive you are because it's important to be green, and then you greenwash. And it's probably the same thing now. The coolest thing right now is AI. It was a particular upswing with the launch of ChatGPT. Then I think you as a company want to follow this trend and show how progressive and competent you are. 'We do indeed have AI, and we know a lot.' (...) Just based on feeling, I think AI-washing is 99% of everything you see. A very high percentage, probably 9 out of 10, of all communication from companies. – J16

Additionally, a handful of participants raised doubts regarding communication about AI, particularly from management consultancies, questioning the AI competence within such firms. They expressed uncertainty regarding whether these firms possess the technical expertise required to utilise the technology effectively.

I think a big risk is that it is perceived from my side that they [management consultancies] only talk about this, but they don't actually know anything. Is it really true that they do something within the field? Do they really have that much technical expertise? – J9

4.2.6 Communication about AI Indicates Innovativeness

Despite their scepticism, most participants recognised the value of companies communicating with job seekers about their integration and utilisation of AI. They suggested that such communication could show signs of innovation and position the company as a leader in the paradigm shift.

That's great [to communicate about AI]. It shows that they [companies] are involved, want to change, want to do something new. Just like all paradigm shifts in the business world or all paradigm shifts in the world, it's great that we have companies that want to do something new. – J9

Writing about AI and how you have implemented it shows that you are at the forefront. 'Shit, you predicted this' is the reaction you want to achieve. Well, I am quite interested in AI as a tool, and I think it's positive to communicate that you want to innovate and actually do so. – J13

4.3 Job Seekers' Preferences on Communication about AI

As discussed in the previous section, communication about AI generally fostered positive perceptions among the job seeker respondents. However, the data indicates that specific preferences exist among job seekers regarding how and what companies should communicate about AI. The respondents indicated that these preferences influence their perceptions of such communication. This theme category outlines the four preferences as themes, each a communication-related factor noted to influence the job seekers' perceptions.

4.3.1 Concrete and Specific Communication

Respondents overwhelmingly preferred communication about AI to be concrete and specific rather than abstract and general. They attributed this preference to their belief that concreteness enhances credibility, which, in turn, increases the interest of the job seeker respondents.

Ultimately, a lot seems to come down to whether it adds a sense of progress and innovation. If that can be showcased concretely, not just with an abstract 'oh wow, this is cool', but with clear examples, it becomes truly interesting, regardless of the precise details. – J6

I think it's more credible when a company can concretely say, 'This is how we use this in our projects, in this specific way.' Or, if they're like, 'No, we're not really into

implementing this yet, but we're thinking about starting'. Being concrete about it just comes across as more genuine. – J8

The respondents' preference for specificity was further emphasised, as they expressed a strong desire for companies to discuss specific AI use cases. They believed that highlighting precise applications of AI underscored the company's role as an innovator, making it more appealing to job seekers.

It's also an opportunity for companies to communicate about it in a good way that makes it feel credible and makes it feel important and interesting. Then it becomes an opportunity because you get the sense that this is a modern company. It feels like they want to do good things. They're embracing the new era. (...) But on the other hand, if I asked you, 'How do you work with data?' I would want you to light up and be able to say, 'Well, you know, we actually did a project for this clothing company. And we came up with this solution, and it was really cool, and then we used AI to do this.' – J9

4.3.2 Focus on Learning

The potential for AI to facilitate personal growth and development within a company was a central theme found in the data. Respondents voiced a clear preference for companies that not only adopt AI but also create pathways for their employees to learn about AI technologies. Hence, the conversation around AI was not just about its current use but also its role in equipping employees for future challenges and opportunities.

I'm not saying that I know a lot about this, but I would really like to work for a company that is proficient in this area, to develop in it and help companies with it. Because I believe it's going to be needed. – J19

The interest in learning about AI was further expressed by the respondents, who highly valued future employers offering courses through formal training. They attributed this preference to seeing it as beneficial personal development and as a means to gain a competitive edge in the consulting field.

It would be really interesting if they offered a course in AI. How it works, and how I could use it in my job. But also just to learn more in general about how other companies use it. That would be really interesting and very valuable, especially within consulting. You need to understand how other industries operate. So it would be incredibly valuable to understand how other client companies use AI. – J17

4.3.3 Transparent AI State and Trajectory

A majority of the respondents indicated they were positive towards companies that transparently share their vision for the future integration of AI. It was not solely the immediate use of AI that captured their interest but rather a company's communicated path toward future AI developments.

You can talk about aspirations. 'We know that what we're working on now is a fairly simple variant, but we have projections that show that this will be so invaluable in the future that we're starting simple now and trying to work towards more advanced knowledge and implementation.' Yes, I would have liked that. – J16

Beyond the aspirational aspect, there was a strong emphasis on the need for clarity about the company's current capabilities with AI and its future objectives. The ability to articulate a clear and realistic strategy for AI deployment was particularly well-received.

I would have reacted positively if someone had said, 'We really see the AI development, and we are working to create a way of working around it. We are not quite there yet, but this is something we are putting resources into, and we see that it is important for our continued development going forward.' – J3

4.3.4 A Balanced Perspective of AI

Lastly, many job seekers expressed favouring a nuanced approach to AI, seeking companies that neither overhype AI's role nor ignore its significance. Thus, they described that some ways of talking about AI can be more discouraging than compelling. For example, an overenthusiastic approach to AI implementation causes a sense of unease.

And then, if it's extreme, like, 'we have AI, we think AI should be pushed everywhere

and apply it as much as possible'. Then maybe I would start to feel a bit more like, okay, that would feel a bit discouraging, perhaps. But I still think I am very open to it, so yeah, as I mentioned at the beginning there, it was really positive [that a company representative talked about AI]. – J11

Moreover, some respondents worried that a company relying heavily on AI and expected universal adoption could create an unappealing or intimidating environment. However, the reluctance to embrace AI technology altogether also sparked concerns.

I think if a company had used AI extensively and wanted everyone to do the same, I might also feel that it wasn't very appealing. Is there an alternative? No, but I believe it's the extremes that are off-putting. Not using AI at all or using it excessively - that's what's discouraged me. – J20

Further, respondents appreciated it when companies also addressed the potential risks associated with AI. Communication that included the challenges and limitations of AI was seen as an indication of a company's depth of understanding and responsible attitude.

And one can also completely flip it around. That the company is over-hyped with AI, that they are also a bit blind, and that they don't see any risks with it. (...) The company must still be aware of the potential risks and what may come. Otherwise, it feels quite like they are almost deceived by AI if they think that there are no risks. – J10

4.4 Company Characteristics Influencing Perceptions of Communication about AI

The previous section demonstrated that the job seeker respondents have specific preferences regarding how and what companies should communicate about AI to foster positive perceptions. The following section focuses on a broader range of influencing factors identified in the data that influence these perceptions. This theme category will particularly explore factors related to the source of communication, i.e. the companies undertaking the EB efforts. It will explore how company characteristics, such as size and reputation, influence job seekers' perceptions of communications about AI.

4.4.1 Size

The data indicated that a company's size influences how job seekers perceive communication about AI. Although the specifics varied, there was generally a consensus among respondents that company size was an influencing factor. For example, communications about AI from larger companies were often viewed as standard practice, while similar communications from smaller firms come across as more progressive.

Large global corporations all do it [communicate about AI] because avoiding it is not an option; it's practically a requirement nowadays. (...) A global powerhouse, with perhaps 40,000-100,000 employees, is bound to have the expertise. They're just a call away from connecting with an AI expert within their network. That's a significant advantage for these larger companies. – J2

But when smaller companies do it [communicate about AI], it shows a bit more of a spirit of innovation, that they are at the forefront. – J4

4.4.2 Reputation

The data underscored company reputation as another factor influencing perceptions of communication about AI. This kind of communication from well-regarded firms, known for their expertise, was typically accepted without question. Their well-established reputation served as a marker of credibility, leading respondents to trust the content of the communications about AI.

It has much to do with my preconceived thoughts about the company. For instance, with BCG or McKinsey, if they say they're employing AI, I trust that they have the expertise. It doesn't come across as an attempt to merely keep up with trends. A reputable company's declaration of AI engagement suggests a credible involvement. In contrast, if a lesser-known or smaller company makes AI claims, it might be perceived as an attempt to impress, and this doesn't convey the same level of quality. – J19

4.5 Individual Characteristics Influencing Perceptions of Communication about AI

Just as company characteristics were observed to influence perceptions of communication about AI, the individual characteristics of the job seekers receiving the communication were also shown to be influential, particularly the interest and competence of the job seeker. This outlines the final theme category that will be discussed.

4.5.1 Interest

The data indicates that job seekers' interest in AI influences their perception of communications about AI. Specifically, individuals who expressed keen interest in AI tend to respond more positively when companies discuss the topic.

Because I think AI is fascinating. Just the fact that they've [companies] addressed it. I would say I get a positive feeling from them bringing it up. – J19

Personally, I find it very interesting, and if it's something I would get to work with more, then it's even more interesting. And I think if a company advertises it, it could be a positive indicator. – J1

4.5.2 Competence

Furthermore, the level of AI competence among the job seekers, or the lack thereof, seemed to influence their perceptions of communication about AI. Specifically, many respondents who admitted to having limited knowledge in the AI field expressed that this deficiency likely hindered their ability to fully understand such communication.

I don't have a technical background. It's a language I don't understand. It might be hard to grasp what the opportunities and challenges are that are expressed in the communication. (...) If I had a background in tech, I think I would find it much more exciting. I feel it's super exciting in one way because I know it's really the future. On the other hand, it feels a bit like, but what will my role be? – J9

5. Analysis

This section analyses the empirical findings, linking them to existing research and examining them through the lens of signalling theory, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the data collected. The analysis is organised around the two research questions. The first subsection (5.1) examines the findings concerning job seekers' and companies' perceptions of communication about AI in the EB context. The second subsection (5.2) begins with an overview of the study's conceptual framework, followed by a detailed examination of the framework's components. It explores the factors influencing job seekers' perceptions of communication about AI and, ultimately, employer attractiveness.

5.1 Perceptions of Communication about AI in the EB Context

This study's initial research question aims to understand the perceptions of both companies and job seekers regarding communication about AI in the EB context. The study's findings suggest that both groups generally perceive communication about AI in EB as positive.

The findings suggest that companies view AI as an essential business practice. Consequently, they also believe incorporating AI into their EB communications will be essential to maintaining relevance to job seekers. Additionally, the companies' positive experiences with internal communications about AI further reinforce their belief in the effectiveness of similar strategies when engaging with job seekers. Using the lens of signalling theory, the companies' rationale can be understood through the concept of countersignalling. Countersignals consist of responsive communication from the receivers to the signaller, providing feedback on the signal's efficiency (Connelly et al., 2011). Thus, when companies receive positive responses to their communications about AI from internal stakeholders, it validates the signal's effectiveness. This, in turn, could enhance their confidence that such communication strategies will be equally effective in engaging other stakeholders, including job seekers.

The empirical data show that job seekers generally regard AI as a key technology for the future of business. Furthermore, several respondents suggested that the opportunity to work with AI enhances the attractiveness of the employer offering it. This perspective appears to stem from the job seekers' enthusiasm for AI as an exciting and beneficial tool they are eager to master.

Moreover, the empirical findings indicate that job seekers perceive companies that actively communicate about AI as innovative and forward-thinking, which they express enhances employer appeal. This seems to be explained by the job seekers seeing such communication as a signal that the company is developing with emerging technology and operating in a novel way. Prior research has established a link between an employer's attractiveness and the provision of interest value to job seekers, which refers to the degree to which an employer offers an exciting work environment, adopts novel work practices, and innovates in products and services (Berthon et al., 2005).

Although job seekers generally showed positive perceptions regarding communication about AI, the findings show that other factors might negatively influence their perception of such communication. For example, some job seekers expressed concerns about AI, particularly highlighting the risk of potential job displacement, similar to what previous research has found (Cohen & Jones, 2020; Johnson & Verdicchio, 2017; Wang et al., 2022). They also expressed uncertainties about how AI will affect consultancy practices and what its adoption in the workplace will mean for their future career. For these job seekers, encountering EB communications focusing on AI might raise concerns, signalling potential risks and uncertainties related to their future careers.

In addition, the empirics revealed that job seekers often perceive a misalignment between EB communication and actual practices and are cautious of AI being used as a mere buzzword. Some participants also drew an analogy between greenwashing and the use of AI in communication, casting doubt on the authenticity of companies' claims about AI. Job seekers' perceptions of AI in EB communication appear to be influenced by their previous experiences of misleading communication. Based on the framework of Wilden et al. (2010), the credibility of any company branding is thus lower, as job seekers feel like companies have previously failed to fulfil their communicated promises. Hence, the perception of the company's communication about AI is negatively affected.

To summarise, there is a discrepancy between companies and job seekers regarding their perceptions of communication about AI. Companies appear primarily positive, whereas job seekers have a more nuanced perception. In addition to their positive views, job seekers seem to also hold scepticism towards AI and companies' EB efforts, thereby negatively influencing their perception of communication about AI within the EB context.

5.1.1 Communication about AI in EB Going Forward

While companies believe communication about AI could effectively maintain their status as relevant employers, the empirical data revealed that they have not yet extensively incorporated AI-related content into their EB communication strategy.

As explained in the findings, the primary reason for this is their focus on communicating AI to stakeholders other than job seekers, such as clients. This approach, analysed from a signalling perspective, can be attributed to the potential distinct signals received from clients regarding AI's importance, steering the companies' focus on that segment. Furthermore, for a signal to be effective, it must be costly, meaning substantial time, resources, and money have been invested in the activities or attributes the signal represents. (Connelly et al., 2011). For a company to utilise its resources in the best way, it must prioritise certain activities over others, entailing that companies may prioritise sending costly signals to the most vital stakeholders. Therefore, it is plausible that the companies have prioritised clients for costly signals, while job seekers have only received these signals as the secondary audience. Hence, job seekers may have seen communication about AI from companies, but the signals may not have been as effective as for clients, as the job seekers were not the primary target segment.

However, the empirical findings suggest that AI will become a higher priority in companies' EB strategies in the future, explaining the company representatives' keen interest in this study's findings. Additionally, this interest indicates that companies actively seek a deeper understanding of how to communicate about AI to enhance their attractiveness as employers effectively.

To conclude, communicating about AI is not straightforward; it requires a carefully crafted approach by companies to be perceived positively by job seekers. The empirical findings have identified several factors expressed by job seekers that can positively influence their perceptions of communication about AI and increase the attractiveness of the employer communicating it. These factors are presented and elaborated upon in the subsequent section of this analysis, laying the groundwork for the conceptual framework.

5.2 Conceptual Framework

As presented in the initial segment of the analysis, the findings identify several factors that can assist companies in communicating about AI to generate positive perceptions among job seekers. The framework (Figure 5) categorises these factors into *controllable communication factors* and *uncontrollable contextual factors*. Each set of factors plays a role in influencing job seekers' perceptions of communication about AI and, ultimately, the overall attractiveness of the employer.

Controllable communication factors are communication aspects that companies have the ability to control and implement. These include the specificity and concreteness of the content, the learning possibilities regarding AI within the company, the transparency of the company's current state and trajectory for AI and the balance between the potentials and challenges of AI. In contrast, uncontrollable contextual factors arise from the inherent characteristics of the company and the individual characteristics of the job seekers. Company factors like size and reputation, alongside individual factors such as personal interest and competence in AI, form the backdrop against which communications are assessed. Together, these factors influence the job seekers' perception of communications about AI, ultimately influencing the employer's attractiveness.

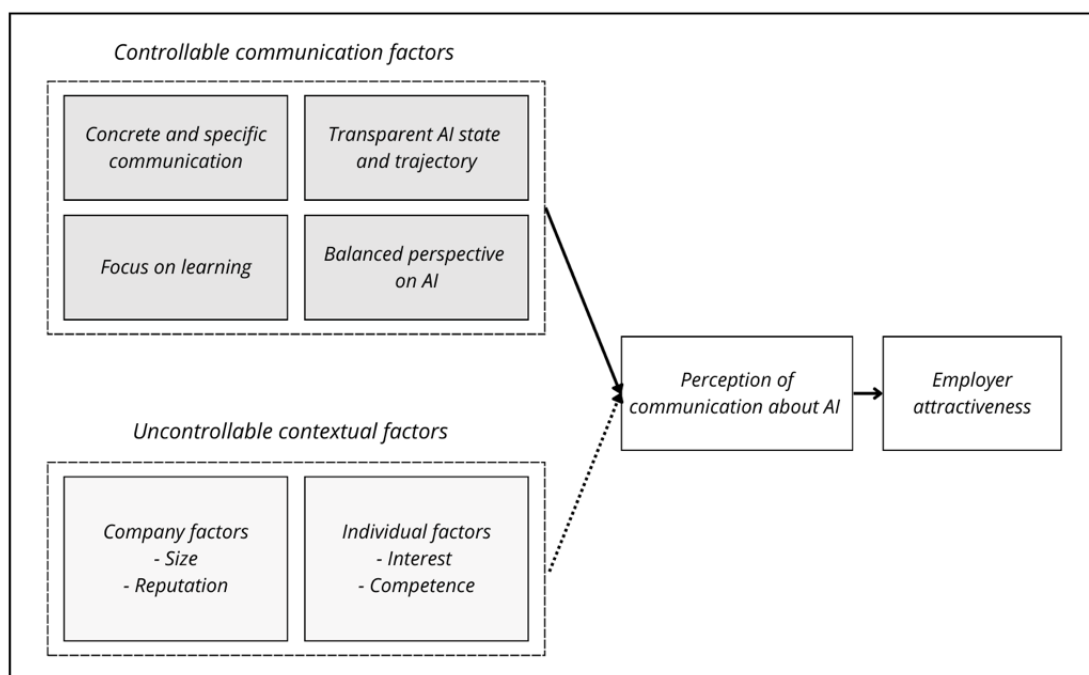


Figure 5: The Conceptual Framework of the Study

In the next part of the analysis, the focus will shift to exploring the nuances of controllable communication factors and uncontrollable contextual factors and their influence on the perception of communication about AI. Subsequently, the analysis will conclude by examining how these perceptions influence employer attractiveness.

5.2.1 Controllable Communication Factors

In the upper left corner of the framework are the controllable communication factors. This set of factors has been shown to positively influence job seekers' perceptions of communication about AI, underscoring the factors companies can control regarding what and how they communicate about AI to positively influence job seekers' perceptions. These factors include the specificity and concreteness of the content, the learning possibilities regarding AI within the company, the transparency of the company's current state and trajectory for AI and the balance between the potentials and challenges of AI. Through the lens of signalling theory, the signalling environment in this context focuses on the signals itself, the communication.

5.2.1.1 Concrete and Specific Communication

The first controllable communication factor is concrete and specific communication. The empirical data suggest that job seekers prefer communication about AI that is both concrete and specific, as opposed to broad and general. Job seekers have illustrated that such concreteness could be achieved through well-defined use cases, whether showcasing internal applications or how it is used for clients. Additionally, the job seekers indicate that a unique use case positively influences the perception of communication about AI. This preference towards specificity and concreteness seems to be explained by the belief that such detailed communication is more credible by offering an in-depth look at the company's actual operations. It can also be seen as more engaging, as specific use cases are perceived as more captivating than generic information. Additionally, the findings suggest that overly generalised communication, lacking in specificity, may foster a negative perception of the communication and the company issuing it. This impression seems to be explained as if the company is using AI merely as a buzzword, potentially engaging in "AI washing". Previous research has found that within the context of CSR in EB communication, the attraction of job seekers is enhanced by EB communication that provides clear, concrete information, including detailed explanations of how the subject is related to the company's strategy (Klimkiewicz & Oltra,

2017). The study's findings thus suggest that these insights also appear to hold in the context of communication about AI within EB.

From a signalling theory viewpoint, the positive response to the specificity in the communication about AI can be attributed to the concept of signalling cost. The concept suggests that a signal's costliness, implying that what is communicated entails a high cost for the signaller, heightens the signal's effectiveness (Connelly et al., 2011). Furthermore, the specificity in communication may signal the company's expertise and commitment to AI, a signal deemed costly due to the time and expertise required to produce detailed use cases. Moreover, the signal's cost can also explain the preference for uniqueness in AI use cases. A unique use case may be related to a high level of innovation and an approach far from generic, which can be associated with a costly investment.

In conclusion, tailoring communication about AI to be concrete and specific can increase the likelihood of such communication being perceived positively by job seekers.

5.2.1.2 Focus on Learning

Another controllable communication factor that emerged from the data was that job seekers positively perceive communication about AI that highlight the learning opportunities available at a company. Specifically, they appreciate companies that offer a variety of learning formats, including both informal learning sessions and formal courses, aimed at enhancing their comprehension of AI applications in client projects and internal processes. This perception seems to be explained by job seekers recognising that learning opportunities contribute to personal development and provide a competitive advantage in their future careers. Job seekers also expressed a desire to stay updated with technological advancements, fearing that employment at a company that does not support the application and learning of AI could hinder their career progression. The recognition that job seekers prefer seeing a learning component in communications about AI can be attributed to findings from prior research, which suggests that opportunities for learning and development are key factors for job seekers when selecting potential employers (Dassler et al., 2022; Terjesen et al., 2007).

Interestingly, regardless of the job seekers' attitude towards AI, positive or not, they universally responded positively to employers offering opportunities to learn about AI. This analysis

indicates that companies that highlight AI learning opportunities in their communications are generally viewed favourably by job seekers, regardless of their initial attitudes toward AI. This favourable perception can be attributed to findings from prior research by Bankins et al. (2023), which suggest that a company culture promoting continuous learning can reduce employees' AI anxiety. Building on these insights, this study illustrates that promoting learning opportunities also positively influences job seekers' perceptions, suggesting that the benefits of such a culture extend beyond current employees to job seekers.

Through the lens of signalling theory, a company promoting training and personal development could signal a commitment to its workforce, implying a valuing and long-term view of its employees. In addition, investing in training and education signifies a notable allocation of resources from a company, aligning with the concept of a signalling cost. A company's significant investment in employee development could thus be considered a costly signal, which increases the signal's credibility and effectiveness (Connelly et al., 2011).

To conclude, tailoring communications about AI to highlight the learning opportunities available at the workplace regarding AI can increase the likelihood that job seekers will perceive such communication positively.

5.2.1.3 Transparent AI State and Trajectory

Another influencing controllable communication factor revealed by the data was the inclusion of honesty about the company's current stage in integrating AI. Intriguingly, acknowledging and emphasising the company's limitations and the challenges yet to be addressed in the field of AI enhances the positive perception of communication about AI. The data suggest two factors that may explain this effect. First, job seekers noted that no one can yet claim "full AI expertise" (J9) due to the technology's complexity and rapid development. Hence, this suggests that such claims could diminish a company's credibility. Second, respondents expressed scepticism about management consultancies' AI proficiency, questioning whether these firms have the requisite technical expertise. Therefore, for such firms to claim to have all the answers on AI today might detract from the positive perception of communication about AI. The empirical data suggest, however, that company communication focusing on what is lacking regarding AI integration is received positively only when accompanied by the company's

vision for it. This seems to ensure job seekers that the company is at least keeping pace with the technology developments.

Previous research within psychology can explain why openly communicating a company's "flaws" and "what is lacking" in AI development is shown to influence perceptions positively. Such studies have shown that on an individual level, transparency about flaws can increase the positive perceptions of the person communicating them (Bruk et al., 2018). The findings from this current study can be related to the reasoning of Bruk et al. (2018), demonstrating that this principle is applicable not only at the individual level but also in interactions between individuals and companies.

Viewed through a signalling lens, the concept of signalling honesty can help explain the findings. Signalling honesty is the degree to which the signaller possesses the underlying quality associated with the signal (Connelly et al., 2011). Thus, if job seekers do not perceive firms as technically advanced in AI integration, but these firms claim to have "everything in place", such communication does not signal honesty and is therefore perceived less positively. Conversely, if a company is honest about its current state of AI integration and highlights what needs to be done, both the communication and the company issuing it are more likely to be perceived positively.

To sum it up, companies that communicate transparently about their current state of AI integration and outline their future roadmap, particularly by acknowledging what remains to be accomplished, can increase the likelihood that job seekers will perceive such communication positively.

5.2.1.4 Balanced Perspective on AI

The empirical data introduces a final controllable communication factor: job seekers' preference for companies adopting a balanced approach to AI, effectively managing expectations by neither overselling nor downplaying its importance. Thus, job seekers tend to avoid companies that either reject using AI altogether or claim it as a solution for every challenge. Thus, job seekers appear to prefer companies that adopt a balanced approach to AI engagement, steering clear of extreme positions. This preference seems to be explained by the perceived risks associated with joining companies with radical stances towards AI use.

Additionally, this balanced approach extends to how companies communicate about AI's opportunities and risks. While job seekers anticipate a certain level of optimism regarding AI from potential employers, they simultaneously expect these companies to address the possible risks associated with its use openly. The positive perception of communication incorporating AI risks appears to be explained by the belief that such communication indicates a deep understanding of AI and a commitment to responsible practices. This preference for risk awareness aligns with findings from Nishant et al. (2023), who found that when public companies announce their AI capabilities without addressing associated risks, it results in negative market reactions. Thus, this study's findings align with the findings of Nishant et al. (2023), underscoring that discussing AI risks is crucial in both market communications and the job market context.

From the standpoint of signalling theory, adopting a balanced approach to AI and avoiding extremes may signal to job seekers that a company represents a safer choice. Extreme behaviours often imply higher risks due to deviation from established norms. Consequently, by maintaining a balanced approach, a company not only signals its legitimacy and adherence to socially accepted business practices (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006) but also demonstrates to job seekers that it is a reliable and established player in the job market.

To conclude, communication about AI that maintains a balanced approach, neither overselling nor downplaying its importance, while clearly highlighting both the opportunities and risks, is more likely to be perceived positively by job seekers.

5.2.2 Uncontrollable Contextual Factors

Proceeding to the next section of the framework, the uncontrollable contextual factors that influence job seekers' perceptions of communication about AI are explored. These do not relate to the communication itself but are contextual factors beyond the companies' control, such as company characteristics and job seekers' individual characteristics. The factors presented in this section should not necessarily be viewed as an exhaustive list but rather as examples of elements companies should be aware of influencing job seekers' perceptions regarding their communications about AI. Employing a signalling perspective, the primary actors within the signalling environment in this context are the signallers, i.e. the companies, and the receivers,

i.e. the job seekers. Thus, it stands to reason that these actors' unique characteristics and attributes influence how job seekers perceive communication about AI.

5.2.2.1 Company Factors

The first set of uncontrollable contextual factors is the company factors. The findings show that how communication about AI is perceived in the EB context is influenced by the source of the communication, i.e. the company. The findings highlight two aspects of the company behind the communication that seem to influence perception: size and reputation.

Firstly, the size of the company is an influencing factor. The findings suggest that job seekers hold different expectations for larger versus smaller firms. Larger firms are expected to have integrated AI into their practices to a greater extent, leading job seekers to view communications about AI from these companies as standard practice and less impressive. This perception was attributed to the assumption that larger firms possess more resources and capabilities, facilitating the integration of AI. Conversely, when smaller companies communicate about AI truthfully and concretely, their communications are perceived more positively. Thus, job seekers attribute this positive perception to smaller firms genuinely committing to integrating AI despite their limited resources.

Secondly, the firm's reputation emerged as a factor influencing the perceptions. The findings indicate that job seekers tend to trust communications from well-regarded firms known for their competence and expertise in general, including in the context of AI. To explain this trust, job seekers express an underlying assumption that proficiency in other areas is likely to extend to AI.

The variation in how job seekers perceive communication about AI depending on the firm's size and reputation can be explained through the signalling theory lens by considering the signaller's quality. In this context, quality refers to the underlying, unobservable ability of the signaller to fulfil what is communicated, i.e., what the communication signals (Connelly et al., 2011). Job seekers may thus perceive a large company or a company with a well-regarded reputation as a high-quality signaller, where they believe in the company's unobservable abilities to integrate AI into their practices effectively. Therefore, communication about AI may be perceived as more credible and positive. Previous research has drawn parallels between

signaller quality and reputation, explaining that these notions share similar characteristics (Connelly et al., 2011).

To conclude, companies need to understand that who they are as a company, their size, and reputation influence how job seekers perceive their communication about AI.

5.2.2.2 Individual Factors

The second set of uncontrollable contextual factors is the job seekers' individual characteristics, including their personal interest and competence in AI. The empirical data suggests that job seekers who expressed a strong interest and competence in AI typically positively perceive a company's communication about AI as it resonates with their personal and professional goals. In essence, when a company's interests align with those of the job seekers, they view the alignment favourably. This concept aligns with existing research, suggesting that job seekers gravitate towards companies that allow them to express aspects of their identity, with "interest" as a critical component of one's identity (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003).

Additionally, an individual's competence in AI, or the lack thereof, also seems to influence their perception of communication about AI. Those who expressed limited AI competence tended to show less enthusiasm regarding communication about AI. This appears to be explained by the perception that communication about AI is discouraging to these job seekers, as it may be seen as tailored for a specific type of person with whom those job seekers do not identify. Job seekers with limited AI competence may feel uncertain about their suitability for a role or a company's culture, sense that the communication is not directed at them, or experience concerns about meeting the expectations tied to AI proficiency.

From a signalling perspective, this can be explained by concepts related to the receiver within the signalling environment. According to Connelly et al. (2011), the effectiveness of a signal largely depends on the receiver's characteristics. One crucial characteristic is the receiver's attention, which pertains to their ability to actively seek out and recognise signals (Connelly et al., 2011). In the context of this study, job seekers who expressed a strong interest in AI can be seen as being more adept at detecting positive AI-related signals from companies that align with their interests, thus influencing their perceptions of communication about AI. Another key

characteristic influencing the signal's effectiveness is receiver interpretation. According to Connelly et al. (2011), receivers decode signals uniquely, translating them into personal meanings that reflect their perceptions. In the context of this study, the job seekers' interest and competence in AI influence how they interpret communications about AI. The empirical data suggest that those expressing a strong interest in AI often interpret such communications as indicative of a good cultural fit. Conversely, those with limited AI competence may interpret these communications as not being targeted towards them.

Ultimately, this set of uncontrollable contextual factors showcases that companies need to consider who their target audience is, as it influences to what extent they look for communication about AI and how they interpret such communication.

5.2.3 How the Perception of Communication about AI Influences Employer Attractiveness

As mentioned in section 5.1, the empirical evidence suggests that job seekers generally have a positive attitude towards AI. They find the technology exciting and express a desire to utilise it in their future workplaces. They also acknowledge the advantages of learning about AI for personal development and maintaining relevance in the job market. Additionally, the findings indicate that job seekers perceive companies which actively communicate about AI as innovative and forward-thinking, attributes that previous research has associated with increased employer attractiveness (Terjesen et al., 2007). However, the data also reveals that job seekers are sceptic towards communication about AI due to previous experiences of misleading EB communication and AI claims. Consequently, job seekers have preferences on how communication about AI in the EB context should be conducted, as these make them perceive it positively. If companies align with job seekers' preferences by incorporating the controllable factors outlined in the framework, they increase the likelihood of job seekers positively perceiving their communication about AI. Thus, by effectively aligning such communication with job seekers' preferences, companies can leverage the inherent appeal of AI to enhance their attractiveness as employers.

In addition to empirics, theory can also be used to explain how positive perceptions of communication about AI enhance employer attractiveness. Wilden et al. (2010) propose that when a company's branding communication reduces job seekers' costs of accessing

information and perceived risks associated with joining the company while also demonstrating commitment, it enhances the employer's perceived quality of the employer and increases its attractiveness. Examining the controllable communication factors identified in the study, it becomes evident that these align with Wilden's framework, reinforcing the notion that positive perceptions of communication about AI increase employer attractiveness.

First, concrete and specific communication fosters clarity and credibility, as Wilden et al. (2010) highlight, which reduces information costs. Second, by communicating a company's learning opportunities, job seekers will likely perceive the company as demonstrating commitment. Third, as a company to provide transparent communication about the current AI state, job seekers' information costs are reduced as they no longer need to verify the authenticity of the information provided. Finally, discussing the risks of AI and having a balanced perspective can increase confidence in a company's ability to manage its AI endeavours and reduce the perceived risk of joining the company. Thus, if companies adhere to controllable communication factors, which reduce information costs, lower perceived risks, and demonstrate commitment, their attractiveness as employers is likely to increase.

6. Conclusion and Discussion

This section presents the study's conclusion, answering the two research questions (6.1). It then provides an overview of the study's theoretical contributions (6.2) and practical implications (6.3). Finally, it discusses the study's limitations (6.4) and suggests future research (6.5).

6.1 Conclusion

In the analysis, the authors have sought to answer the study's first research question:

How do job seekers and companies perceive communication about AI in the context of employer branding?

Generally, both job seekers and companies perceive communication about AI in EB as positive, though certain complexities introduce nuances to this perception.

The study found that companies almost unanimously see communication about AI as beneficial. They seem to base this view on AI's anticipated future importance and believe incorporating it into EB communications is essential to remain relevant in the job market. Additionally, positive feedback from internal stakeholders on prior communication about AI enhanced this belief. Although companies have not extensively engaged in communication about AI within EB at this point, they acknowledge its potential value and are keen to expand on this going forward.

Job seekers have, in general, positive perceptions toward communication about AI in EB, though these are rather complex, as several nuanced factors influence them. Their positive perception of such communication seems to be driven by the belief that AI represents an exciting and useful tool they are eager to engage with in their future workplaces. They also seem to believe that competence and experience in AI could provide them with a competitive edge in the job market. Additionally, job seekers perceive companies that actively communicate about AI as more attractive, projecting an image of innovation and forward-thinking. However, job seekers also have some concerns. Based on previous experiences with

EB communication, they see the potential for a disconnection between what is communicated and the companies' actual practices, leading them to question the authenticity of the companies' claims about AI.

Nonetheless, the study found that there are ways that job seekers prefer companies to communicate about AI, along with other factors influencing their perception of communication about AI. This finding contributes to addressing the second research question:

What factors influence job seekers' perceptions of communication about AI in terms of employer attractiveness?

The study identified several factors influencing job seeker's perceptions of communication about AI. These factors include communication-related elements within companies' control, as well as broader contextual aspects beyond their control. The factors that companies can control and that have been shown to influence perceptions of communication about AI positively include the specificity and concreteness of the content, the opportunities for learning about AI provided by the company, transparency about the company's current and future integration of AI, and a balanced perspective of AI's potential benefits and challenges. In addition to the factors companies can control, the study recognises contextual factors outside the companies' control that influence how communication about AI is perceived. Notably, the company's characteristics, such as the company's size and reputation, play a role in influencing the perception. Moreover, the individual characteristics of job seekers, including their expressed personal interest in and competence in AI, also influence how the communication is perceived. Furthermore, this study demonstrates how positive perceptions of a company's communication about AI enhance its attractiveness as an employer.

6.2 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several theoretical contributions by exploring the research gap and integrating three distinct streams of research: EB communication, perceptions of AI, and employer attractiveness. By using a signalling perspective, the study contributed a deep and nuanced understanding of the perceptions of communication about AI and the factors influencing job seekers' perceptions. Aligning with the initially targeted contributions from

section 1.3, the study makes three main theoretical contributions that will be elaborated on below.

Firstly, this study enriches the literature on EB communication's influence on employer attractiveness. Previous literature has found evidence that communicating organisational innovativeness in EB positively affects employer attractiveness among job seekers (Sommer, 2017). This current study substantiates and deepens Sommer's findings by showing how communication about AI, not merely innovation, increases an employer's attractiveness. By exploring how EB communication influences employer attractiveness within the context of AI, the study has yielded insights into a somewhat unexplored, nascent, and emerging field of research.

Secondly, this study has contributed to research examining perceptions of AI in the workplace among job seekers. The findings align with existing literature (Koo et al., 2021) that reports mixed attitudes toward AI in the workplace. Previous research has identified several factors that are associated with the positive perceptions of AI in the workplace, such as productivity, creativity, learning opportunities, and innovation (Skjuve et al., 2023). The current study reaffirms these factors and identifies a new one: the potential for personal career advancement and maintaining relevance in the job market.

Lastly, the study enriches the research on EB communication related to emerging business trends. Whereas past studies have concentrated on how emerging business trends such as CSR and innovation enhance employer attractiveness (Sommer, 2017; Jones et al., 2014), this current study expands the discourse by incorporating the emerging field of AI. For example, prior research suggests that for EB communications to enhance employer attractiveness in the context of CSR effectively the communication must be both specific and concrete (Klimkiewicz and Oltra, 2017). Aligned with these authors' findings, this current study found that similar factors seem to hold true in the context of AI.

6.3 Practical Implications

This study presents actionable insights for companies navigating the integration of communication about AI into their EB strategies. By understanding how to strategically communicate about AI, companies can enhance their appeal to job seekers, gaining a

competitive advantage in talent attraction. The study offers guidance on crafting communication that resonates with job seekers, increasing the likelihood of positive responses and enhanced employer attractiveness. More specifically, the study highlights the importance of considering various factors before communicating about AI in EB, providing a framework for effective communication strategies. Additionally, the study sheds light on how communication about AI is perceived, equipping companies with the knowledge to anticipate and navigate potential perceptions. Overall, the findings empower companies to strategically leverage AI content in their EB communication, ultimately enhancing their ability to attract and retain key talent.

6.4 Limitations

As in all research, this study's findings are subject to certain limitations. These encompass methodological constraints, contextual considerations, and potential biases in data collection. Acknowledging these limitations aims to provide a transparent assessment while identifying areas for future research and methodological refinement.

First, the company sample included in the study exclusively focuses on management consultancy firms in Sweden. This restriction limits the generalisability of the findings, as they solely reflect the perceptions within this specific industry. Variances in the perception of communication about AI may exist among other industries, and likewise, job seekers may perceive communication about AI differently when originating from different types of companies. Furthermore, as the study is confined to Sweden, inherent cultural aspects are not considered. Consequently, it remains uncertain whether other types of companies and their targeted job seekers, as well as management consultancies and job seekers from other countries, hold different perceptions.

Second, while this study showed that individual characteristics such as competence and interest influence perceptions of communication about AI and, thus, employer attractiveness, it is plausible that other factors such as demographics, geographics, or educational background may exert a greater influence. However, this study did not investigate the influence of these variables, thus leaving their potential impact unknown.

Third, while the qualitative research method allowed for identifying factors influencing perceptions of communication about AI and obtaining nuanced responses, it also limited the ability to quantify the strength of these influences. In exploring communication about AI's influence on employer attractiveness, the assumption of all other things being equal was made. However, the data revealed that certain unexplored factors may hold greater importance for job seekers when evaluating employer attractiveness. Hence, there was no direct assessment of how AI was rated as a standalone factor compared to other factors influencing employer attractiveness. Therefore, while the influence of communication about AI is understood, its relationship to communication about other factors remains unknown.

Lastly, it is essential to acknowledge the potential for bias in the data provided by company representatives. Their responses may be influenced by a desire to present a favourable image to the authors, who are part of their target audience. Consequently, there is a risk that their answers may reflect aspirational rather than actual practices, potentially skewing the study's findings.

Despite the research's limitations, the study offers valuable insights into the perceptions of communication about AI. By acknowledging these limitations, the exploratory nature of this research is underscored, aiming to contribute to a nascent research field. Although the findings may not be fully generalisable, they provide a foundation for future research to build upon, fostering a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics between perceptions of communication about AI and employer attractiveness.

6.5 Future Research

Given the limitations identified in the study, the authors wish to highlight three areas where future research could be valuable to conduct. Firstly, future research could beneficially extend the understanding of communication about AI beyond the realm of management consultancies to other organisational types. This expansion would validate the findings' applicability and offer a broader perspective on how various organisations and their respective job seeker target perceive communication about AI. Secondly, employing quantitative methods to test the findings of this study could provide statistical support, revealing the robustness of the correlations between the identified factors and employer attractiveness. Such insights would enhance comprehension of the impact of the identified factors. Lastly, while this study has

identified individual characteristics like interest in and competence with AI that influence perceptions, it is likely that other variables also play a significant role. Future research could explore these additional factors' effects on communication about AI, which would equip practitioners with crucial information and highlight significant areas beyond this study's scope.

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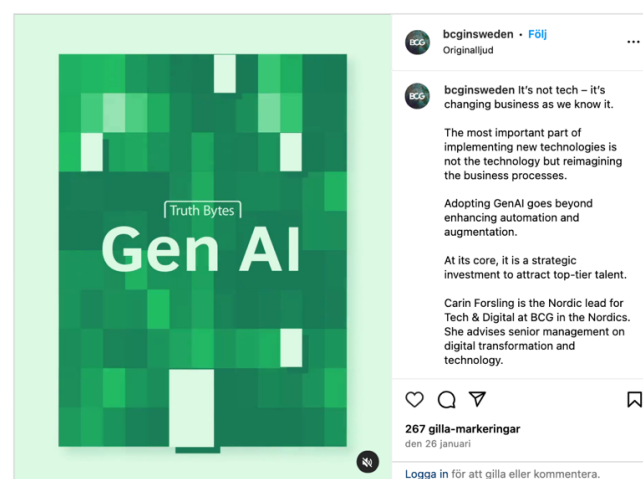
8. Appendices

8.1 Appendix A: Research on External Communication about AI

Examples

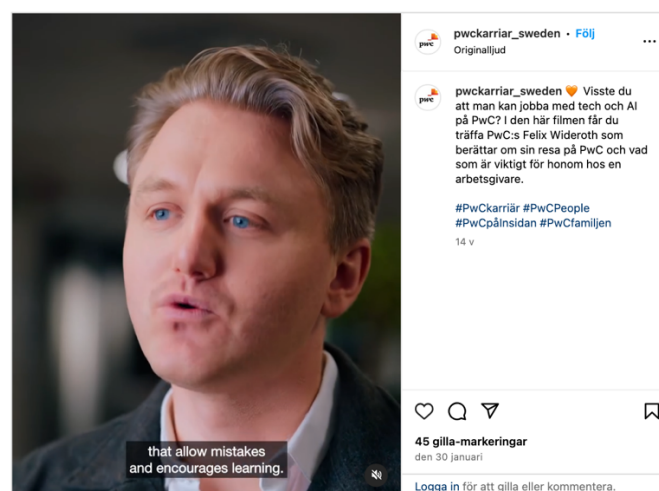
BCG Nordic

(Accessed 2024-01-26, Instagram)



PwC Sweden

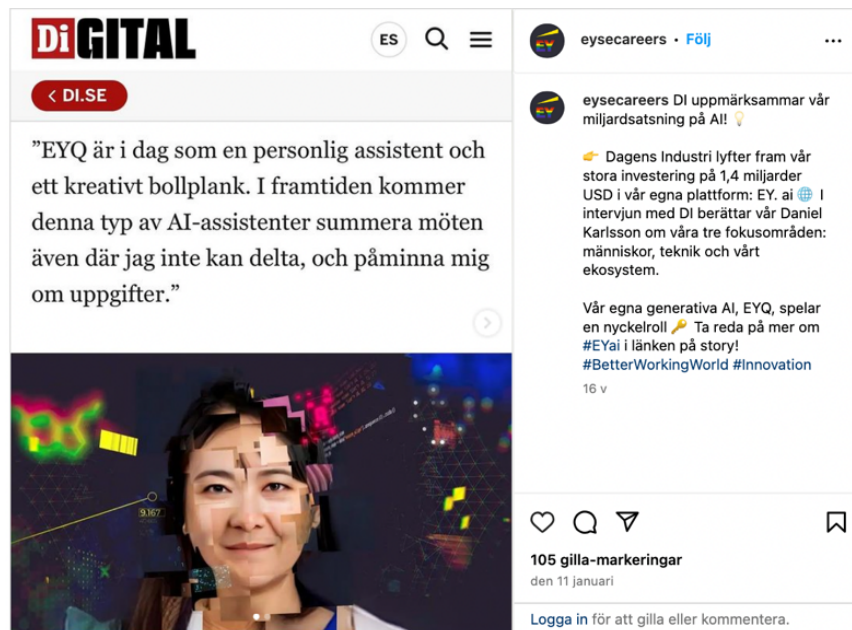
(Accessed 2024-01-30, Instagram)



Translation of text: Did you know that you can work within tech and AI at PwC? In this clip you get to meet PwC:s Felix Wideroth who is sharing his journey at PwC and what's important for him regarding an employer.

EY Sweden

(Accessed 2014-01-11, Instagram)



Translation of text: DI is spotlighting our billion SEK investment in AI! Dagens Industri highlights our big investment in our own platform: EY.ai. In the interview with DI, our Daniel Karlsson talks about our 3 focus areas: people, tech and our ecosystem.

Deloitte Sweden

(Accessed 2014-01-23, Instagram)



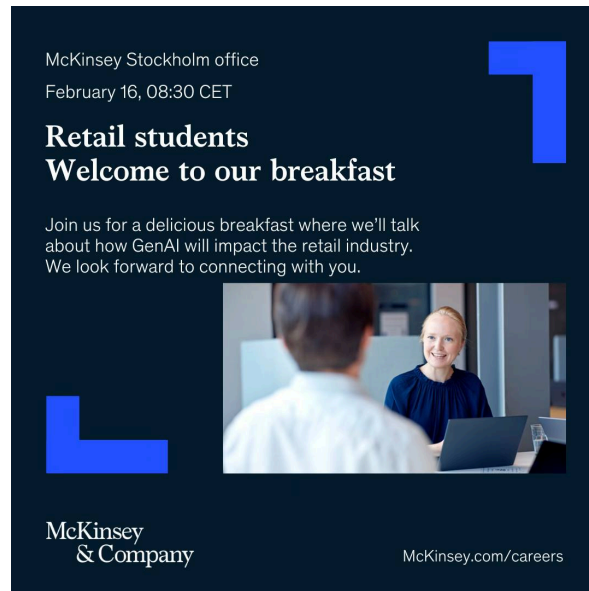
Translation of text: This week, we launched PairD—Deloitte’s AI portal—to our employees! PairD can be used for tasks such as content writing, code generation, and conducting research securely. Learn more at the link in our bio!

8.2 Appendix B: Research on EB Communication about AI

Examples

McKinsey

(Accessed 2024-01-30, BC opportunities Facebook group)



Implement

(Accessed 2023-11-10, Company website)

IM_

Home / Events / Exploring generative AI

Event

Exploring generative AI

An evening for ambitious students on AI and the future of management consulting

Where

Implement Consulting Group AB
Fleminggatan 14, 8th floor
112 26 Stockholm
Sweden

When

16 November 2023
17:30 - 20:30 (CET)

Price

The event is free of charge.
Food and beverages will be provided throughout the evening.

What we do

Who we are

Join us

Are you studying and want to explore generative AI with us at Implement Consulting Group while learning about life as a management consultant. You are invited!

Are you ready to embark on a delightful journey into the world of Implement Consulting Group, and are you curious to discover how generative AI is shaping the future of the management consulting industry?

Then join us along with fellow ambitious students for an evening filled with delicious food, refreshing drinks and a relaxed atmosphere as we explore the fascinating topic of generative AI together.

Mark your calendars for **Thursday 16 November 2023**, as we welcome you to our Stockholm office for a social evening. Here, you will get an excellent opportunity to mingle with potential future colleagues and get a taste of what life at Implement is like.

You will get to know us, and equally important, we will get to know you!

Who are we?

Implement Consulting Group is a Scandinavian management consultancy with a global reach and 1,500+ employees. We offer a wide range of services, ranging from strategy, innovation and digitalisation to operations and leadership support.

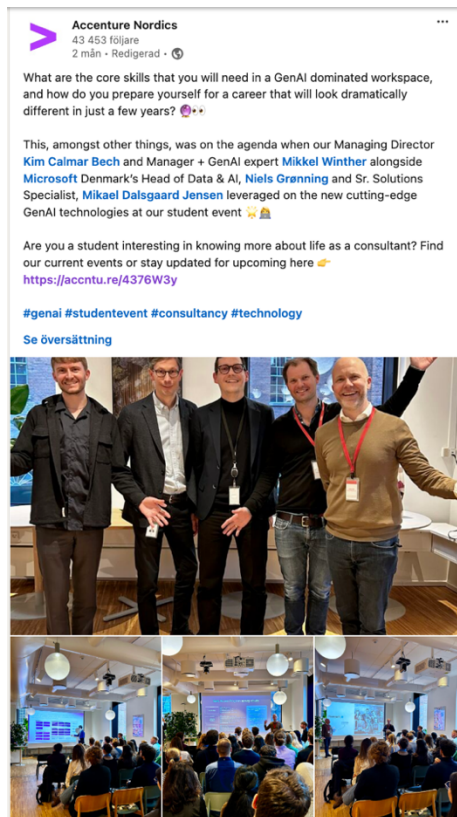
Who are you?

You are an ambitious and curious 1st-4th year student.

Talk to a consultant
12 online

Accenture

(Accessed 2024-02-10, LinkedIn)



Bain

(Accessed 2024-02-05, Company website)

BAIN & COMPANY

Careers

Work with Us

Life at Bain

Impact Stories

Hiring Process

FIND JOBS

Recruiting Events

The best way to learn about a role here is to drop by and ask questions. Our many in-person and virtual events will give you a sense of our culture, offer a look into the work we're doing for diversity, equity, and inclusion, and help you decide if one of these careers is right for you.

GET TO KNOW US

Monthly webinars for a peek into our work

Our webinars are an easy first step to understand the work, life, and culture here. See inside popular industries we work with like AI, sustainability, and private equity, hear about opportunities, learn to prepare for interviews, and more.

8.3 Appendix C: Observation Notes

Example of observation notes

Observer: Hanna & Elina	Date & Time: 2024-02-01 11:12
Activity: Talking to companies at career fair at SSE	Duration of observation: 15 min

Relevant info on the company/company representative: (Industry, size/role, age)

Company: a global professional services firm, management consulting one part of it. Has had AI campaigns globally on LinkedIn, as noted prior the observation.

Company representative: Role within Talent Attraction, been with company for 5 years. Around 45-50 years old.

Context:

Every year, companies come to Stockholm School of Economics where they have a chance to meet with the students studying there. There are two days with different companies each day, where they have stands displaying their employer branding. At each stand, there are minimum one company representative aiming at interacting with students to attract to the company. As the authors are students of SSE, they attended as students.

Notes:

- No visual signs of AI or innovation
- Does not mention AI as something they are doing or important when asked to talk about the company.
- When asked about AI at their company, representative mention that it's not heavily used yet. Point out that themselves use it mainly for emails and brainstorming for informal events.
- Mentions that there is a large difference in AI usage and attitude between the ages. Younger people more engaged and updated.
- More of a topic for the management team and tech to discuss. Then are also certain groups in the company that are involved.
- As they are a big company, it will take a long time to implement AI initiatives
- Appears to be a discrepancy between what is done on a internal local level, than what is marketed on global level.

8.4 Appendix D: Company Sample

Participant	Gender	Role	Years in company	Age	Date	Length
C1	Female	Head of Marketing	2	29	2024-02-22	47:05
C2	Male	Talent attraction and acquisition specialist	2.5	30	2024-03-07	53:13
C3	Male	Employer Branding Specialist	2.5	27	2024-03-05	57:48
C4	Male	Managing Partner	10	49	2024-03-12	49:50
C5	Female	Employer Branding Specialist	6.5	n/a	2024-03-01	48:49
C6	Female	HR & Recruitment Specialist	2	25	2024-02-27	42:50
C7	Male	Business Analyst and Employer Branding	0.5	26	2024-02-19	36:49
C8	Male	Senior Consultant and Recruitment	2.5	27	2024-03-07	58:30
C9	Female	Recruitment and Employer Branding Manager	12	42	2024-04-10	51:59

8.5 Appendix E: Job Seeker Sample

Participant	Gender	School	Education	Age	Date	Length
J1	Male	LTH	MSc Business & Management	24	2024-02-28	43:49
J2	Male	SSE	MSc Business & Management	23	2024-03-05	51:07
J3	Female	SSE	MSc Business & Management	25	2024-03-14	1:01:41
J4	Male	SSE	MSc Business & Management	24	2024-03-07	51:50
J5	Male	KTH	MSc Industrial Engineering & Management	25	2024-03-06	48:09
J6	Male	Chalmers	MSc Industrial Engineering & Management	25	2024-03-14	48:53
J7	Female	SU	MSc Operation Management & Control	24	2024-03-14	48:41
J8	Female	KTH	MSc Industrial Engineering & Management	24	2024-03-12	46:09
J9	Female	SSE	MSc Business & Management	24	2024-03-15	58:49
J10	Female	SU	MSc Operation Management & Control	29	2024-03-06	52:07
J11	Male	LTH	MSc Industrial Engineering & Management	24	2024-03-07	57:59
J12	Female	SSE	MSc Business & Management	25	2024-03-14	49:25
J13	Male	Chalmers	MSc Industrial Engineering & Management	25	2024-03-14	53:42
J14	Female	SSE	MSc Business & Management	22	2024-03-12	55:59
J15	Male	Uppsala	MSc Management, communication & IT	27	2024-03-06	51:09
J16	Male	Chalmers	MSc Industrial Engineering & Management	25	2024-03-12	59:09
J17	Female	SSE	MSc Business & Management	26	2024-03-06	49:09
J18	Female	SSE	MSc Business & Management	24	2024-03-05	37:09
J19	Male	KTH	MSc Industrial Engineering & Management	24	2024-03-05	50:59
J20	Female	SSE	MSc Accounting, Valuation and Financial Management	25	2024-03-12	55:09

LTH: Lunds Tekniska Högskola; SSE: Stockholm School of Economics; KTH: Kungliga Tekniska Högskolan; Chalmers: Chalmers Tekniska Högskola; SU: Stockholms universitet; Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet

8.6 Appendix F: Job Seeker Interview Guide

Topic	Question
<i>Background</i>	• Could you please state your age, the name of the school and education you are attending, and your expected graduation year? • Could you briefly describe the types of roles and companies you are seeking (or have sought)? Why?
<i>Selection and Communication with Employers</i>	• How did you find the roles and companies that you have applied to? What was your strategy? • How did you determine whether the companies you applied to would fit you well? Did you have any specific criteria? • Can you recall a situation where a company's communication positively impacted your view of them as a potential employer? • Based on their communication, can you tell us a situation where you dismissed a company that could have been a potential employer?
<i>Perceptions and Attitudes Towards Communication About AI</i>	• "As you know, AI is a major trend, and companies are increasingly starting to explore and use it. Companies have also begun to communicate about AI to different stakeholders. For example, companies communicating that they are hosting AI events, presenting AI cases, or more generally including it in their marketing." • Have you seen examples of this? What are your thoughts on it? How do you react? • When you think of these examples, what do you think of companies communicating about AI? • Why do you think these companies communicate about AI? • Why do you think some companies have decided not to do so? • What are your thoughts on potential risks and challenges for companies communicating about AI?
<i>AI and Employer Attractiveness</i>	• When I say AI - what feelings and thoughts do you get • In what ways, if any, are you interested in involving AI in your career/work? • What, if anything, do you find interesting about AI beyond just using it as a tool? • Imagine I am an employer looking to recruit you. What should I tell you about AI at our company to gain your interest? Is there anything I should avoid saying?

8.7 Appendix G: Company Interview Guide

Topic	Question
<i>Background</i>	• Can you describe your current role and your background within the company? • Tell me a bit about the company and how it differentiates itself from competitors.
<i>Employer Branding Experience</i>	• How are you involved in the company's employer branding practices? • When meeting with job seekers, what do you tell them about the company and why they should apply? For example, at the latest student fair/event you attended. • How do you communicate your employer brand through different channels?
<i>Communication About AI</i>	• "As you may know, AI has emerged as an important trend, and companies have started to use it in their communication/branding." • Can you reflect on whether AI plays a role in your current employer branding practices? How? Can you give examples? • Why did you decide (not) to incorporate it in your EB communication? • How does this relate to actual AI projects in the organisation? How has the focus on AI evolved/changed during the last year? • What are your thoughts on potential risks and challenges in communicating about AI in your employer branding? • Have you encountered any challenges? If so, how did you address them? • How do you see the role of AI in employer branding evolving in the next few years?
<i>Job Seekers' Response to Communication About AI</i>	• What has the response been from job seekers regarding your communication about AI? • How have job seekers responded during job fairs? • Did they receive critical questions? • What do you think job seekers' perceptions are of companies communicating about AI?

8.8 Appendix H: SSE GDPR Form



Standard text and consent to participation student's survey / interview

The student's project. As an integral part of the educational program at the Stockholm School of Economics, enrolled students complete an individual thesis. This work is sometimes based upon surveys and interviews connected to the subject. Participation is naturally entirely voluntary, and this text is intended to provide you with necessary information about that may concern your participation in the study or interview. You can at any time withdraw your consent and your data will thereafter be permanently erased. Confidentiality. Anything you say or state in the survey or to the interviewers will be held strictly confidential and will only be made available to supervisors, tutors and the course management team. Secured storage of data. All data will be stored and processed safely by the SSE and will be permanently deleted when the project is completed. No personal data will be published. The thesis written by the students will not contain any information that may identify you as participant to the survey or interview subject. Your rights under GDPR. You are welcome to visit: <https://www.hhs.se/en/about-us/contact/data-protection/> in order to read more and obtain information on your rights related to personal data.

Project title: Master Thesis – Spring 2024, Elina & Hanna	Year and semester: Spring 2024
Aim of the study: The aim of this thesis is to explore how job seekers and companies perceive communication about AI within the EB context. In addition, the thesis aims to identify key factors influencing job seekers' perceptions of communication about AI, ultimately shaping their perception of the employer.	
Students responsible for the study or interview: Hanna Thapper Uudelepp & Elina Westberg	
Supervisors and department at SSE: Elmira Van den Broek	Supervisor e-mail address: elmira.van.den.broek@hhs.se
Type of personal data about you to be processed: Name and surname, age, email address	

I have taken part of the information provided above and consent to take part in this study:

Name	Place and date
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8.9 Appendix I: AI Use

During the course of their thesis, the authors utilised two AI tools, Grammarly and Klang.ai. This section describes these tools and their applications. Additionally, it assesses the contribution of these tools to the thesis, addresses potential risks associated with their use, and explains the methods used to mitigate these risks.

8.9.1 Grammarly

The first AI tool utilised was Grammarly, a plugin program designed to assist with writing. Utilising premium accounts, the authors had access to advanced features, including grammar, spelling, and punctuation correction, language consistency, clarity enhancement, plagiarism detection, and the use of generative AI prompts for polishing drafts and generating ideas. All suggested modifications from Grammarly required the authors' approval before implementation. This tool enhanced the quality of the thesis by promoting a consistent tone and style despite the thesis being authored by two individuals. Moreover, Grammarly improved text clarity through suggestions for rephrasing and correcting grammatical mistakes, making it easier for readers to understand.

However, the authors recognise inherent risks associated with using such AI tools such as Grammarly. A primary concern is the potential for data biases, where AI might mirror the biases in its training data. Without careful oversight, there could be a risk of "lost in translation" effects, where the original content and intended meaning are twisted. Another concern is the potential loss of the human authorial voice, as AI lacks the nuanced understanding and creativity of a human writer, potentially diminishing the content's engagement and emotional impact. To mitigate these risks, the authors implemented several safety measures. The original text was consistently authored, limiting the AI's possibility of fabricating new information. All reformulation suggestions from Grammarly were thoroughly reviewed to ensure the intended points remained clear. Lastly, the authors strictly managed the prompts given to the Grammarly chatbot, ensuring that the original points were clearly communicated.

Grammarly Inc. (2024). *Subscription: Grammarly Premium*.

<https://www.grammarly.com/>

8.9.2 Klang.ai

The second tool used was Klang.ai, an AI-powered transcription tool designed to assist in transcribing, summarising, and analysing interviews and meetings. This tool was employed during the data collection phase to automatically transcribe interviews with the sample groups, offering functionalities for editing, searching, and downloading the transcriptions. Klang.ai contributed to the study by significantly reducing the time spent on transcription, allowing the authors to focus more on data analysis and improve the quality of the thesis.

However, the authors are aware of the risks involved with using Klang.ai, particularly with regard to transcription accuracy. The tool may not always deliver precise transcriptions, particularly in instances of poor audio quality, background noise, multiple speakers, or distinct accents. Such inaccuracies can lead to misrepresentations of the spoken content. However, this issue was addressed by utilising the tool's feature that allows users to listen to the audio file while simultaneously reviewing and correcting the transcription. Another risk concerns data privacy and security since sensitive information processed and stored on external servers could lead to unauthorised access and potential data breaches. The authors addressed this risk by informing all interview participants about the use of Klang.ai and obtaining their permission. Furthermore, the company details its data security policy on its website ([link](https://www.klang.ai)), providing transparency about how user data is managed and safeguarded.

Klang AI AB. (2024). *Subscription: Start*

<https://www.klang.ai>