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This is a Final draft version of a publication
published by Routledge
in Small Enterprise Research

DOI: 10.1080/13215906.2021.2000482

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Please cite the publication as follows:

Ari Happonen, Laura Manninen, Marika Hirvimäki & Alexander Nolte (2022) Expectations for young job applicants' digital identity related to company's social media brand development strategies, *Small Enterprise Research*, 29:2, 87-108, DOI: 10.1080/13215906.2021.2000482

Special conditions of the publisher (if needed)

**This is a parallel published version of an original publication.
This version can differ from the original published article.**

Expectations for young job applicant's digital identity related to company's social media brand development strategies.

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It is common for SMEs to include their employee's social media image and followers into their own brand development strategy. They thus consequently also make the social media image and followers of prospective employees part of their recruitment strategy. Most students however have not yet noticed this trend and are mostly focusing on goals set by their education programmes without focusing on the potential marketability of their own social media image. To address this gap, we conducted a literature review and interviewed representatives from recruiting companies. Our findings reveal that growth-oriented companies seek applicants with good individual brand image because they perceive it as an indication for future gains in this regard. Moreover, we also found that companies should support new applicants' skills in their orientation process, especially related to social media branding because it will potentially help them align to the company's brand vision.

Keywords: Brand; SME; Recruitment; Digitalization; Orientation; Digital transformation; Expectation management; Individual brand; Social media; Skill development; media visibility; Customer engagement

Subject classification codes: include these here if the journal requires them

1. Introduction

Studying SMEs recruiting practices, SMEs requirements and expectations towards future recruits were found to not to match the expectations what the potential new employees had on those requirements. SME companies are commonly considered to look for well-trained and educated young people to bring new talent and growth potential into the companies. Companies however also include well-established personal brands into their recruitment consideration. Given the companies' expectations towards recruits, their own public social media image was assumed to reflect this, especially since a positive and professional online image is vital for companies to be distinguished from their peers. This is especially pronounced nowadays as the current student generation has had wide exposure to online material and multitude of social media channels when entering the job market. Current students thus tend to have higher online presence and outlook expectations for all brands they encounter, compares to what the previous generations ever had. They are influenced by social media, where large audiences inspect public content and company actions daily, so made up artificial and/or misleading content is typically

easily noticed by the talented social media content readers and will be quickly dismissed (Dhaoui and Webster, 2021; Berendt et al., 2018). Moreover, universities have started to teach the new generations how to be able to notice news from fake news as part of their educational programs (King-O'Brien, 2021).

For this research, the core themes were individuals and SME brands. The research addresses social media visibility, connecting individual-level brand building with the requirements coming from the business world, in the context of what sort of individual brands SMEs are looking to recruit to boost their own social media visibility. In particular we focused on the meaning of individual brands of prospective employees for company brand building and for employment decisions. To address the goals of the research, a literature search for challenges and opportunities of social media brand building was conducted. The literature was then supported by a qualitative interview study with analysis of views from employer and future employee point of view. By comparing the future needs (e.g. skills) that companies mentioned as a set goals in recruitment with the explained best practice models presented in the literature, the research identified suggestions and different approaches for resource limited SMEs to boost their brand. A possibility for growth seeking SMEs to actively support company brand formation with the help of strong and quickly spreading individual brands was also speculated in discussions.

1.1 Social media for SME brand building

Social media can function as a modern and new form of a visibility enabler for (small) businesses (Dahnil et al., 2014; Fan et al., 2021). It has been reported as an excellent platform for customer engagement and shared interaction activities like new product innovation (Teh and Kee, 2021) and it works as a support tool. This is also valid point for new product development too, for SMEs facing collaborating and trust-based challenges with outsiders (Happonen and Siljander, 2020), in the current covid-19 type of social distancing restricted times (Rakshit et al., 2021). In social media, with a relatively small investment of resources, businesses can distribute messages to a wide audience, as social media acts as an enabler for wide audience communication and as a means to connect businesses and audiences (Moharejani et al., 2014). Similarly, content sharing, marketing and customer communication can be facilitated. However, while that sounds promising, it only works and makes economic sense if a so-called critical mass (Ruangkanjanases et al., 2020) of followers (i.e. somewhat stable social media audience) can be reached (Paniagua & Sapena, 2014). Smaller and early-stage SMEs are often better at utilizing new and novel media channels, than larger more established companies (Moharejani et al., 2014). It could be that the younger companies have less tightly defined practices and stable culture on media collaboration. Less restriction would mean easier path to adopt social media as

communication channel. If this is one of the only branding and utilized media channel, then the presence will also grow faster and more spontaneously. Non-traditional and innovative approaches to marketing and brand promoting, like guerrilla marketing strategies with modern marketing twists, can boost the company visibility, in comparison to more traditional approaches (Sebastian et al., 2017). While many larger companies could learn from these innovative SMEs, it still takes time for them to learn company culture fitting new ways for themselves to generate new kinds of results (Freeman and Engel, 2007) in the digital world. In the end, even strong brands struggle to attain the desired visibility gains (Paradiso, 2016) when trying to reach their target audience utilizing social media though. Overall, the development and additional research need in this subject was supported by examining the views, aspirations and expectations of those involved in the rapidly digitalizing and changing modern environment, where business life and private life meet (Broadbent, 2016; Osakwe et al, 2020; Itam et al., 2020).

2. Research context and process for interviews

To address the set research goals, we conducted a review of prior work, combined with a qualitative interview study of recruiters of SMEs. For the literature review, we focused to publications discussion on how companies form their brands and what are the aspects on brand forming, they consider important. This literature review is addressing the need to increase overall understanding of different stages of SME brand forming and current state of the art literature knowledge on the topic. Also, we have built new novel constructs to help to understand the details and supportive steps to consider for in social media as part of the tools in brand construction process.

For our interview study, we recruited a large variety of interviewees from different branches of industry. The persons interviewed held different mid / high level positions in the companies, and the companies themselves were currently in process of recruiting new employees (Table 1).

Table 1. Background of the interviewed persons.

Branch of industry	Position in the company
IT business	Management and marketing, founder
IT & game industry	CEO
IT business, software	CEO
IT services	Leaders of the unit
HR	Leader of the unit
HR, public administration	Development managers of staff
Logistics	Head of HR
Logistics	Head of C&M
Advertising agency	Sole trader
Design services and management consultation	Creative leader

We particularly selected individuals from the companies' human resources, upper management and also the owners & CEOs due to their connection to the recruitment process. The main goal of the interviews was to identify which skills or existing background experience companies look for in new employees. For the interview industry persons, the interviews were also used to map their views, experiences and corporate ideologies related to the themes of individual and company brand building. Additionally, we wanted to improve the general understanding, related to the overall perceptions, people have related to the social media utilization in recruitment and also as a company strategy / approach to enhance their SMEs social media image/brand. Basically, this goal setting made us to focus our questions towards ideologies of hiring new, young employees, and what would be the company's attitude towards the utilization of social media as a recruitment tool and/or a means to study the applicants possible fit to the current or the visioned / wanted company culture. In total, we did interview 15 specialist, study area experts and recruitment coordinators. These interview sessions lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. To analyse the obtained interview data, we conducted an exploratory coding procedure. We mainly focused on the personal characteristics that companies expect from their employees (e.g. expectations of a particular type of individual brand). Moreover, we also analysed their answers correspondence to what was the set brand building targets and the mentioned ideologies how they would or how they are planning to build their brands, in collaboration with new employees. For this goal, the interviews included opinions, approach descriptions with ideologies and the current models the companies followed in their recruitment process, specially in the connection to their brand creation activities. Also, given the goal to understand the new employee connections to brand development work, the view of young new employees was gathered from student, just entering the work life. The interview group of young students answered to their views of building brands with companies and what sort of assumptions the interviewed students had expected the employers' needs and wishes to be, compared to what was explained by the employers.

3. Research and literature review

Social media provides a unique marketing opportunity for companies (Eagleman, 2013 ; Zollo et al., 2020). It is an efficient marketing tool that can complement traditional marketing procedures and it has been shown by newest research, that social media marketing will just keep getting more importance, on post covid-19 time (Mason et al., 2021). The difference to traditional marketing is that in social media, companies can directly and immediately react to feedback from their customers. Also spreading of the desired message from customer to customer and to new potential customers can happen quickly (Dahnil et al., 2014). With social

media, companies' objectives include enhancing the communication inside the company and between the company and its customers, increasing information and cooperation, decreasing the costs caused by communication, and reaching experts more easily than through traditional channels (Meske and Stieglitz, 2013). Common obstacles for adopting social media were lacking resources and skills in sales and marketing, outdated technology, huge and constant flow of content, fake news and non-monitoring nature of the social media, plus the opposition against change among the employees, and lacking technical information (Stockdale and Standing, 2006; Meel and Vishwakarma, 2020). In practice, companies are still having a lot of old habits like relying on radio and newspaper marketing and they focus on using traditional tools in general. However, companies are utilizing social media for their needs of information sharing, which has then "invigorated the way knowledge is shared within organisation prompting to rethink the role of technology in organisation" (Kwayu et al., 2021). Still, traditional tools (e.g. e-mail) have not been replaced, especially for marketing communication. Realistically, replacement is not even possible if companies do not have enough knowhow about how to utilize different technologies and applications (Dahnil et al., 2014; Meske and Stieglitz, 2013). Still, even though social media is an inexpensive communication and marketing channel, a specialized person would typically be needed to reap the benefits (Gilmore et al., 2007). For SMEs, hiring new personnel is a resource challenge, so the social media visibility, marketing efforts and updates are often lower priority level activities. Also, if the employers have low spirit towards life long learning / studying new technical skills, social media adoption can be a challenge for a company (Morris and Venkatesh, 2000). As social media means open and constant 24/7 online public visibility for organizations who put themselves on the open/public platforms, they then also need to find way to have appropriate resources to monitor the discussion, reactions and post made by the people and also be present to react in the time, which is expected in their own specific audience group and in the selected social media platform. Otherwise it might not be possible to e.g. respond to negative comments in an acceptable / needed time frame.

Besides skills, employees' attitudes toward social media needs to be proper for the defined context, and this attitude is mostly defined by how they use social media in their free time, as elaborated in (Treem et al., 2015) and by Chen et al. (2020), not even the current research has catch up on identifying the fact, how important factor the organizational culture has an impactor for the employees' work attitudes, behaviours and job outcomes. On the other hand, communication with different parties was considered the most important reason for individuals to use social media in addition to entertainment (Drahošová and Balco, 2017). People generally spend a total of 142 minutes on average per day using social media (Drahošová and Balco, 2017). People also felt that using social media at work might distract employees from work and disturb professional use of social media, that could benefit the company (Broadbent, 2016).

However, many considered information sharing and relations building as the greatest benefits of social media services. (Treem et al., 2015)

When the skills, tools and attitudes match, the decisive factor is whether the management gives support for marketing work or not. Without the management’s wholehearted support, the gains are hard to achieve (Wickramasinghe and Widyaratne, 2012). With support & psychological mentoring and encouragement by the management the employees do feel more motivated, secure and they commit to their tasks (Day and Allen, 2004). In short, the company management’s skill to incorporate new technologies and new recruits’ skills and to promote positive information sharing towards the changes in plans, will all affect the whole company personnel’s attitudes toward the changes (Dahnil et al., 2014). The commitment the employee has to the company, is connected to the fact, how strongly the employee feels the sense of being part of the organizational culture and part of the team and the ability of the person to share the values of the company. Understanding the connection, should make companies more interested to support their employees in knowledge, skills and overall insight building about the set objectives, vision and future talent needs of the company itself. By helping the employees to see the big picture and by supporting growth with the company, attitudes and behaviour can be affected, which in turn affect brand commitment. Good relationships with the employees also foster their commitment to company values (King and Grace, 2012). Support like that makes employees be aware of the organization’s goals, which in turn enhances work motivation (King and Grace, 2012). It could be said that mutual support, commitment, and preparedness for a constantly changing work environment are the keys to success for SMEs.

Looking at the social media possibilities, Table 2 lists the most relevant prospects and the possible risks of applying them to companies (Dahnil et al., 2014; Meske and Stieglitz, 2013; Treem et al., 2015). When adopting the prospects, companies need to offer sufficient technology utilization orientation (Sánchez-Mena and Martí-Parreño, 2017) and specially consider newest knowledge on how personal brands can attract and retain engaged attention (Smith and Fischer, 2021). Also, alternative educational models in orientation and training processes will help people with different learning preferences and abilities (Marshall, 2014). As Nicholson (2015) wrote “choices will raise the chance for learner to find meaningful connection to the material”.

Table 2. Prospects and challenges of social media.

Prospects	Challenges
Communication with customers	Lacking in resources
Rapid reaction	Outdated technology
Direct feedback	Lack of knowledge and skills
Fast spreading	Attitudes toward change
Low costs	Insufficient managerial support
Reaching experts	

3.1 SMEs options for success in employee-based brand visibility boosting

According to Bandura and Lyons, offering learning opportunities to employees makes them to appreciate the organisation, to stay longer in the company (Govaerts et al., 2011) and to work harder towards the goals the company has set. Given the higher commitment level, training the employees has definitely clear economic sense on it. Unfortunately, there is the economic fact of costs coming from training, skill building, giving courses and so on for the employees, and not all of the companies have resources for it. It does not mean, that they cannot do it, but it do mean that they have to approach the issue some other way, than directly utilizing money and internal time resources to educate their employees. Also getting all the employees together at the same time might be a challenge (Bandura and Lyons, 2015). Considering the time and money resources, SMEs need to look for more affordable options than big companies. Here the positive effects of digitalization, e.g. free / affordable MOOCs and online self-learning courses could be supportive addition to integrate into the orienteering process (Georgsson, 2019).

The pros of orientation include the fact that it increases group mentality and motivates employees in their work. Good orientation is well planned, it is tailored to the firm's needs, it includes concrete learning with motivating the employee to new skills, it creates fresh group mentality in the workplace and it includes both the employer and the employee using participatory leadership and teamwork (Wallace, 2009). Planning the realization of orientation helps entrepreneurs to develop business processes, strategies, training skills, communication, and interpersonal skills in their business (Bandura and Lyons, 2015). For practical implementation, the company can use in job learning, video courses, training camps, homework exercises and distance learning etc. In any case, the access to the training material afterwards helps the employee to retrain themselves, and revisit and revise the things they learned in the orientation (Bandura and Lyons, 2015). As a summary, the list below demonstrates the characteristics included into a good training programs, based on the articles (Bandura and Lyons, 2015; Kingman, 2018) and book (Stein and Christiansen, 2010):

- clearly defined roles and responsibilities
- information and experiences sharing
- organisational transition and its explanation
- explains the company brand and teaching of the company's strategy
- only short distances without lengthy travels
- concrete learning and motivating elements
- flexibility (learner-orientation)
- cost-efficiency
- promotion of group mentality
- access to the materials after the orientation

- feedback to employees (often if possible)
- practical and participatory exercises with clear objectives and presence of the employer

3.2 Trust as a tool in social media, for SME brand growth

People want to stay in warm relations with reliable & trusted companies and keep using their services and as such the best SME growth stories tend to be built over trust-based models (Mitchell et al., 2015). The trust a company is being able to acquire in social media, is an important factor for a company's brand growth. Also, the process of understanding more deeply about the sources of consumers' trust building models in the social media platforms and company products and services marketing channels (Irshad et al., 2020) can be one of the key performance boosting aspect for new blooming success of that particular company (Ebrahim, 2020). Especially as happy customers are often more than willing to recommend a company and its services to their own peers. And lastly, the best recommenders are the peers of the customers (Lin, 2014; Smith et al., 2005). Often the reliability of a brand is connected to the quality of the product, quality being a requirement for building brand reliability (Hess et al., 2014). In the end things surrounding the service or the product itself will either strengthen or weaken the brand's image and credibility. E.g. a durable product packaging is considered of higher quality, more user-friendly and simpler to use (Hess et al., 2014), which creates the quality and good brand image.

3.3 Image and brand commitment

A brander should find the knowledge and observe what attracts customers to few & selected group of service providers. In other words, standing out (Munteanu, 2015) is competitive advantage (Jia, 2020) for a good brand. When a company management commits to the company strategy, it is helping the company to stand out in a world where multiple products and services are available at the same time (Paradiso, 2016; Mitchell et al., 2015). And for many SMEs, properly planned and executed networking (Megha and Shubham, 2020), can also provide brand boost and get some additional brand commitment from customers. On the other hand, even when social media marketing can be affordable tool to make yourself widely visible, you still need to invest to the customers commitment e.g. by revealing what the company has to offer for them and for their needs (Paradiso, 2016).

3.4 Small businesses and brand names

Social media tools have become an important way for companies to reach their target audience (Atanassova and Clark, 2015). Due to their interactivity and speed, these tools have become

especially popular among micro-enterprises and SMEs (Atanassova and Clark, 2015). In fact, for SME's social media can be a premier way to compete with big companies due to this approach being rather inexpensive compared to traditional media channels (Genç and Öksüz, 2015). In any media, the consistency of brand is important for overall brand view, where a well-chosen name supports company brand, which increases consumer awareness about the company and its products and strengthens the consumer experience towards the brand image (Arora et al., 2015). A suitable brand name increases consumer awareness and strengthens the image and product connectivity (like Adobe photoshop). Especially new SMEs should consider their name with future in mind. Also, for startups and SMEs, (Wongpreedee et al., 2015) mentions that most will need the younger generations' support to succeed, and the company name should reflect this need. Also, many famous brands (e.g. Nestle and Bank of China) have been named after cities and family names. In the modern world, new names should be short and easy, memorable, catchy, and correspond with the company (Wilkinson and Thomas, 2007). In the naming context, according to McCune, brand names are typically chosen utilizing one of four strategies: 1) semantic names that provide direct information about the product, 2) people's names, 3) unexpected names, such as Apple or 4) made-up names, such as Xerox. Localized names are also used e.g. in the Chinese market areas, where the company name can be directly connected to a place (Arora et al., 2015). However, product/service and name brand are only part of the success factors. E.g. according (Bulchand-Gidumal et al., 2013) the 3 key factors in customer satisfaction are the productivity and accessibility of the service, population qualification, and environmental quality (Bulchand-Gidumal et al., 2013)].

When naming a company, products or services it is important to understand the customer base while at the same time thinking about which image should be portrayed (Buschgens et al., 2020). The meaning of the name should be clear, so that the name can be connected to something and saying it out loud should create associations as well. A name could also symbolize a central value of the company and should describe the whole product family, not just one product (like the previously mentioned Adobe photoshop). The global nature of today's business world can be a cause for concern though as a name can easily create negative associations in different cultural contexts or pronunciation forms (Arora et al., 2015). For companies with enough resources, instead of creating a brand from scratch it can be faster and easier to get to markets to purchase and develop an existing, strong brand (Frey et al., 2015) as brand creation is typically seen a risky and lengthy process.

4. Research data and results

The qualitative analysis provided the insights regarding the companies' experiences and expectations related to recruitment, with the objective to understand how the findings would align with the related literature.

In addition to managers and HR specialists, students were also interviewed to compare their respective perception of the recruitment processes and how the reality met the students' expectations. The selected students were university-level second-, third, and fourth-year IT students. Table 3 provides a comparative overview between the companies' and students' views, both from skills and personality point of view.

Table 3. Comparing companies and students' views.

Topic	Companies	Students
Attitude and world view	Positive, enthusiastic attitude, open for change and willing to learn new things	Keenness and will to develop themselves, positivity
Personality	Standing out is an asset (e.g. in application stage)	Personality was not mentioned in the interviews
Determination	Applicant know what they want and how to develop themselves and how they justify their ideologies	Beneficial to know the expectations and how one wants to advance in work
Interest for the business	Can be shown already in the application stage, e.g. with a call to company	Important, shown by studying company's materials
Professional skills	Attitude is even more important, skills are best shown in practice, and willingness to learn is also important	Very important, work experience plays an important part in showing one's professional skills
Motivation	Willingness to learn is also obligatory	An important criterion
Interpersonal skills	Important, team work and meeting with customers	Can be shown in the interview
Practical work in school	Is a minimum requirement, but does not tell enough / too much about skills	Could be mentioned in the CV, the difficulty of practical work is course dependent
Own projects	These were stressed	Tool to show one's skills
Networks	Not the most important thing, but beneficial	Good for applying for work

Comparing the data points to each other, significant differences were identified between the companies and the job-seeking students thinking lines, e.g. what was the time span companies and students would refer as "long time frame future planning". Companies seek suitable people to their network and work environment with long term view and they seek people with suitable knowledge & skills, which they can mentor and move to next levels. Companies mentioned that job seekers should express their personality and have the attitude for ideology like, *by working, one can learn new things, and skills keep on growing on a daily basis*. That sort of job seekers were popular for employers according to research their careers

are more easily supported by the companies, e.g. by supporting individual's career hopes (Takeuchi, 2016).

On the other hand, the students' answers illustrate a short-term way of thinking: *"my first workplace, as long as I find some long-term work"*. For young students, the opinions of the peers are highly valued, they do not have a clear picture about the companies specifically and many times male applicants refer to higher salaries while female applicants focus more on the possibility to combine work and free time (Millward et al., 2006). Companies can apply e.g. gamification in recruitment to try to make it more efficient (Buil et al., 2020) and enhance the engagement level of required task to be done (Santti et al., 2020a), but they really should aim to understand applicant's actual goals. In the process of job finding, applicants should focus their search on "promising" job positions and deeply investigate the background of their company of interest. According to (Koena et al., 2010), this sort of strategic focus and time utilization in the explanatory phase of job seeking will increase the number of job offers and interview requests the applicant receives.

Companies want to find out applicants' determination, i.e. what applicants want to do with their life and why. Students perceived the meaning of determinedness to mean "work as usual" and task skills to resolution skills of challenges, and not that much something like a life-long path view. Thus, the terminology and questions recruiters use to interview students have to be well thought-out to help young recruits express their long-term goals. Specially to help them to express it the way the companies are seeking to understand interviewed persons (work)life goals. On the other hand, the companies' view was that the role of the education is to form a basis for professional skills while real deep area specific experience is gained by working in a job over an extended period. The students in turn thought that education and grades would directly reflect the skills these companies would be looking for (e.g. knowing how to code software "the right way" and think in certain ways). Companies also look for goal-oriented job applications, who can express what they want to achieve in life. That makes sense, as Hodge et al. (2018) has written *"...Brand orientation is a strategic approach observed in business that positions the brand at the centre of organisational processes and has been shown to improve marketing and financial performance..."* and one cannot effectively orient brand strategically, if the aims of people in the company and the business goals of a company are not aligned. For the job application, to be aware of their own goals an applicant can show to be goal-oriented and motivated to work, which increases the applicant's chances to get hired. This also helps an employer to move this person towards positions the employee might excel in. Other than that, students and employers' views were mostly similar. To summarize, companies want to know what the employee wants, to be able offer a work environment that enables people to succeed. Good support creates a positive attitude towards work, which in turn can improve performance (Hao and Yazdanifard, 2015). Also, when companies support their employees with orientation

and clearly explain company goals, employees' motivation towards work grows (King and Grace, 2012) which can be supported through different methodologies, designed for HRM activities like gamification, which has been studied to be important in achieving goals in through learning processes, as it is supporting the increase of motivation and performance of employees (Vardarlier, 2021).

Ideological differences were also observed from the job applying process, e.g. how keen people were vs. should have been to differentiate themselves from other applicants. The applicants expected different ways of showing their interest to the job to be plus for them, compared to what the employer / the company was expecting, in the context of their business goals. Students thought that they should learn more about the company and its business by reading material about the company and their domain. Basically, students considered it important to get educated about the company. But the companies said that showing your interest with real, tangible and concrete actions that are visible for them, is more important to get into the interview (Tomaska and Nosek, 2018). E.g. when an applicant is ready to send the application, he/she should get in contact with the company, discuss expectations and needs, and tweak the application according to information received. Also, the applicant has to apply this knowledge to update the cover letter too. Companies are especially looking for determined employees, and the more visible their determinedness is, the better. Active applicant is often considered to be a person with common way of doing things and something which is a part of their personality, not just a momentary "push" to get the job. Managers / job interviewers also believed that they can recognize certain personality traits, e.g. just based on a short phone call. For further research, it would be beneficial to study, how many applicants really are in contact with the companies. Also, the company representatives' real level of talent to assess personalities, just based on a phone conversation, would be an excellent follow up research topic too, to be added to the previous studies in first impressions analysis (Dougherty et al., 1994; Mast et al., 2011; Simons, 1995).

4.1 Company brands and recruitment

As part of our study, for individual brands to support the company brand enhancements, a short review work was conducted about companies' current own public brand images. We found that only some of the companies used social media actively. They mainly used it for marketing and company vision sharpening purposes. Most companies used social media for just the basic visibility (company contact details and explaining the product / services they offer to their market segment). Popular channels were Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn. In practice, the most popular ones seemed to be the most common social media and the channels which appear to have the biggest audience. When interviewed, none of the companies however

had tried to examine what kinds of channels their specific and/or key customer groups usually actually used. Also, the companies had not benchmarked their competitors' social media channels to see, are they missing some important visibility opportunities.

There are many ways to aim at visibility, but just from the point of view of statistics on gaining audience, funny posts and memes seem to be most popular / effective (Kingman, 2018). The concrete experience-based view among the interviewees was that a more famous brand is also more successful. The companies also claimed that they recognize the significance of a good brand for business continuation. When asked for thoughts about employee's individual brands, the message was they do not look for personal brands as such. In recruitment, companies looked for charisma and a positive, extroverted and enthusiastic attitude. Active touch on daily work and visibility of this activity in results was also a highly valued characteristic. Employers also mentioned that they appreciate clear and polished applications (indicating more than average effort) and good execution in interview(s). Finally, as every new employee is clearly a human resource related financial risk investment (Chu and Fang, 2021) for new skills, work hours and innovation potential available for the company, a recommendation for the applicant, from trusted 3rd party was highly appreciated or even needed to get the job (Nehler, 2018).

When the comparison work was made, between the company own social media brands and the company's set employees' social media channels behaviour rules, following was observed: A company with a strong brand in social media brand is typically stricter online behaviour rules. These companies paid more attention to factors that could affect their image directly and indirectly than others. In the same vein, the companies that used social media daily, said they appreciate employees who use social media also in their leisure time. One interviewee even said they should not hire a person who does not use social media as their work requires understanding of social media and its structures, tools and ideological inner workings. Additionally, for companies with core business connection to graphic content, the use of social media's visual applications was more active than with others. As for application and visuals, a company mentioned that they go through the applicant's Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn account if any of those has been mentioned in the application.

4.2 Analysis and summary of the research data

The following is a summary of our findings:

- (1) Companies' visual communication varies a lot inside and between them (both qualitatively and quantitatively). E.g. quantity of material varies a lot, so does material quality (amateur vs. pro level), only few hired a specialized marketing professional as most did marketing alongside other tasks or it was outsourced to third parties
- (2) Some companies had barely any shared digital material

- (3) The use of communication resources in the companies did not seem to be too well planned, e.g. social media marketing was not well-defined task, it was secondary priority which was given from person to person indicating low valuation for it's output by the management
- (4) Some surprising observations were made about the reasons for the current state of affairs:
 - a) fast growing company had deliberately chosen low Internet invisibility as it would be hard to respond to any additional customer contacts /contracts, b) as no one was responsible for "cleaning up" the public materials, old and new were both available in their dedicated communication channels.

As a short summary, the following can be inferred. If companies want to support the spreading of their visual and digital marketing material thus improving their brand visibility, they should support their customers' networking needs and maintaining their own networks too. From personal networking, communication and visibility point of view, people want to be active in social media, with their peers (Bonds-Raacke and Raacke, 2010; Chen, 2011; Li and Lin, 2012; Kim et al., 2010). Companies must stay up-to-date and follow what is important for people at a certain time and place and adapt their brand messages accordingly. The brand message should be built for things that people within their target market consider important, following with the brand message. Additionally, the brand message should be easily relatable and something that people would want to re-share (Appel et al., 2020). By doing that, companies will get their message out. Depending on the context of company's business area, practical implementations can differ lot, but specially SME sized companies should differentiate from big companies' processes and policies in their marketing communication to stand out and increase influence by approaching the marketing challenge, for example through entrepreneurial sensemaking.

5. Discussions and results' interpretations

Considering the research from the companies' current online visibility (video material and visual visibility) point of view, authors did observe the current state. It was seen, that even though there is plenty of discussion about digitalization and social media, the actual state of them is often not well developed in SMEs. SMEs still have plenty of room for improvement in their material quality and the way their message is delivered to recipients. When analysing companies' public image, based on their webpages and social media materials, the bit below average than expected outlook was sometimes found to be a deliberate choice, made by the companies themselves. E.g., a company explained, that they had to heavily cut down public marketing as their order books were more than full at the moment. So, if a job applicant really wants to know what companies are capable of, it is a good idea to ask for references and recommendations from peers, call to people who are named contacts in recruitment process and study e.g. public financial records, instead of comparing companies together, based on their

webpages. True reference data from peers should weigh more than sleek appearances. Similarly, in hiring, the decision among applicants should be based on true will and readiness to learn and work, instead of past grades and words in motivational letter.

For companies in SME size, communication and cost efficiency are advantages of social media, as well the possibility to use it as an applicant’s skill portfolio verifying tool besides information sharing, communication, and involving activities (Genç and Öksüz, 2015). As a final example, the table 4 shown below is used to lists the pros and cons of social media platforms from female entrepreneurship point of view, as their support tool for achieving better results in their set entrepreneurship goals. The table is based on Genç and Mksüz (2015) study (Genç and Öksüz, 2015).

Table 4. The pros and cons of social media (Genç and Öksüz, 2015).

Pros	Cons
Cheap information sharing	Unknown audience
Constant communication	Unfair competition
Large-scale networking	Decreased market share
Following trends	Copycats
Portfolio presentation	

Lastly, even when we found that companies said that they were not looking for “brand people”, they did specify that they want to find good personalities, who stands out. So, they are in fact looking for employees with individual brands that align with the company’s set of values and image. They want to hire persons with aligning goals, suiting the employer.

6. Practical implications of found results

A data related limitation of our study is based on the fact, that we did survey less than 50 companies. Moreover, our interviews focused on young applicants, and little to no data was collected from the age group of 30-year-old and up. Still the research illustrates the situation of growing SMEs and real miss match on recruits’ expectations on skill set that guarantees a job in technology industry positions. On the other hand, as Mamabolo and Myres (Mamabolo and Myres, 2020) have elaborated that the skills, which are required in the different phases of the entrepreneurial process is not a simple cut through task to do. Even tough, nowadays there are of course some digitalization-based solutions to map the skills of personnel in company (Vatousios and Happonen, 2021; Vatousios and Happonen, 2022), the work by (Mamabolo and Myres, 2020) does suggest that it is a truly challenging task to specifically be able to define the exact match between the needed skills and the job under consideration.

As for networks, social media visibility and company values, employee’s work orienteering programs should include models where newcomers familiarize themselves with the

company's external brand (e.g. students report) and ways to make the new person welcome to the job (Wallace, 2009). A new employee is not yet fully aware of the company's internal structures and is completely dependent on external material like any other third party would be. On the other hand, new employees will observe nuances that the internal personnel cannot detect (Mello, 2005). First work week idea collection by new employee can be an essential tool for aligning seamlessly the outwards-oriented brand image and what happens in the organization's internal operations. Companies could also look at orientation programs from a longer time perspective too, e.g. with student path programs (Happonen, 2014), where students have time e.g. during a master thesis development time, to gain valuable insights into company activities and operations development needs. If the newcomer, now trained and familiar with the external communication, would still be surprised by the company's internal structures, one should inspect will any potential customers feel the same. Confusion between internal and external message can be damaging in B2B operations, like in sub-contracting negotiations. For example, when companies promise any mass customization to their product with 3D printing (Piili et al, 2013), but then actually cannot deliver, people will get highly disappointed. This experience of conflict conveys a questionable picture of the company's real level of professionalism and demands fast actions for improvements. Shortly put, it is a good idea to embrace all channels and opportunities that can be used develop a company's external communication through the experiences of external brand visibility and a new employee's brand skills. Later, when the internal orientation and brand image polishing is successful, companies could start to build deeper knowledge sharing models, e.g. with HEI units and use company's new employee's social media skills for collaborative brainstorming (Salmela and Happonen, 2012) activities.

6.1 Literature based advices for social media use in companies

The research findings suggest that companies branding efforts need to be focused on the right kind of positive social media activities. In practice, meaning participation, sharing, discussion and cooperation, without straightforward advertising and selling. With wisely chosen social media channels, companies can start developing brand resource-efficiently and with great consideration towards their target audiences. Typically, going to the social media channels, where the customers already discuss together and being part of society activities where the customers want to contribute too (Palacin et al., 2019; Palacin et al., 2020), will work well for the companies. Usually the most efficient solution is to combine social media and traditional marketing, because from customers' / end users' point of view, they both are a part of a company's visible image (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

In Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) article “Uses of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media”, the authors are providing set of concrete advices for companies’ to use in social media platforms for the practices these organizations could utilize. The studied and interviewed companies were found to have internalized the general spirit of these hints quite well. From the literature point of view, the advices of Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) for efficient procedures in social media were: choose the channels wisely, stay active, match the service and audience, participate and share content customers want, be humble & follow the communication culture and be consistent between channels, create company’s social media guidelines, learn from mistakes and blend in (down-to-earth way) and be honest and respect the rules. On the other hand, Paradiso (2016) advises companies to encourage employees to commit to the company’s social media strategy and recommends hiring a person to handle active social media visibility. This communication professional would have to be familiar with the company’s culture and ensure good training of other employees. In the best case, the professional will also improve the company organizational culture (Santti et al., 2017; Eskelinen et al., 2017; Happonen et al., 2020b; Santti et al., 2020b) and help business development as part of the job, when making the internal quality and business excellence, externally visible. Feedback is also important in the orientation of new employees. Paradiso also advises companies to follow the attitude: *“failure (as) a chance to grow and learn”*. Social media is changing daily, so being successful is lifelong learn path to follow and you need to follow the way people communicate and keep trying new things. (Paradiso, 2016)

6.2 The meaning of individual brands

Besides considering employees’ social behaviour, the company’s own communication and fitting brand name, one could consider of adding (social media) celebrities / influencers to the companies’ brand creation toolkit too. Social media influencers can bring brand visibility and create desired value associations (Dwivedi et al., 2015), and they usually come with a large group of online media channel followers to begin with. This can also be interpreted as significant evidence about how individual brands can affect company brands. Meaning, paying more attention to individual brands in operations and recruitment can be beneficial for the employers. Based on our research, it is quite evident that some of the young applicants do not currently pay enough attention to the significance their own social media brand is affecting and/or could work as a tool for themselves to get the dream job they seek. There is a room for additional research on why even good workers are not hired as an applicant could stand out with just a distinctive web portfolio. For applicants it is important that they showcase and build their skills as part of their individual brand image.

7. Conclusions and summary

Given the findings, SMEs still have a lot to improve in digitalization, social media, and expanding their brands efficiently in digital media realms. They have room for improvement both in honing their existing brand images, adopting the potential of individual brand images and exploring newest technologies (Ghoreishi and Happonen, 2020ab; Ghoreishi et al., 2020) helping them to build frontline brands. In addition, there is a clear need to create procedures, processes and to support the boosting of applicants' individual brand images. The research has presented new insights into the current state of this phenomenon, especially in the studied context of Finnish SMEs by reflecting research findings to the existing literature on how to coordinate the customers information needs, in connection to new recruit's brand image and companies brand image targets, which when properly implemented, can create added value for companies.

As a core finding of the present research it can be summarized that companies have multiple different level branding related wishes, but still they have not built and provided facilities, support processes and orienteering programs that could be used to support the realization of these wishes. From the prospective employee's point of view, it seems like companies sets requirements, but do not fully support them and cram the pressure of operative productivity on the employee whenever possible. Then the employee will quickly start working for towards the desired operative results and thinks that they are doing what the company wants them to do. As a result, the management gets disappointed in the employees, because some of the requested tasks have not been met, or it might seem like the employees are not interested in committing themselves to the development goals set by the company. One solution for the students is to understand the skills, personality and knowledge traits companies look for, would be for HEI units and companies to work together. They could collaborate to organize more shared hackathons, code camp events and courses which take customers and design thinking into account (Porrás et al., 2018; Porrás et al., 2019; Happonen et al., 2020a; Nolte et al., 2020; Happonen and Minashkina, 2018ab; Palacin-Silva et al., 2017) to provide real life challenges for the students and help them be prepared to ask right questions, have the proper knowledge (Metso et al., 2019; Metso et al., 2020; Minashkina and Happonen, 2020; Jahkola et al., 2017) and be ready to work independently, when they land on actual jobs later on.

For a follow up empiric field research of this conflicting situation, examining the root causes for the phenomena we explored is highly suggested. Within the companies, there is a need to create a research-based, proven and concrete solution base, which then can be used to decrease things that are stopping them to be productive. Additionally, like Kucharskaa and Mikołajczak (2018) had put it, personal branding is growing up to become a new in-demand professional skill to master. Teaching curriculums should thus take this into account, as it is one

profound universal skill, which would be useful for anyone in any curricula to master, especially now when the global digitalisation and services digital transformation moves traditional product-based companies towards knowledge base solutions offering units (Kortelainen et al., 2019).

Conflict of interest statement

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

Disclosure statement

The authors want to express their gratitude for South-East Finland – Russia CBC programme for supporting AWARE project, funded by the European Union, the Russian Federation and the Republic of Finland. The funding and project made it possible for publishing this work and to be able to disseminate the knowledge about brand building through new recruits, which can be great tool for new SMEs focusing on sustainable products and services for fast visibility. Also, we would like to thank MINT project, European Regional Development Funds and Regional Council of South Karelia for the positive support for this work.

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