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Chloé Guillot-Soulez, Sébastien Soulez

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GENERATION Y PREFERENCES FOR EMPLOYER BRAND BENEFITS

Chloé Guillot Soulez - chloe.guillot-soulez@uha.fr
HAUTE-ALSACE UNIVERSITY
Sébastien Soulez - sebastien.soulez@uha.fr
HAUTE-ALSACE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper studies the preoccupations of young graduates from Generation Y transitioning from education to employment. Reviewing job search and employer brand literature, we update graduates' preferences for employer brand benefits in their initial job search. Using conjoint analysis on a French sample (N = 592), we demonstrate that, even if on the whole they prefer job security and a relaxed work atmosphere, their expectations are heterogeneous. The results also show that the Internet is far from being the first medium used by these young "digital natives" graduates for the job search. This research lead to discuss the relevance of the concepts of Generation Y and generational segmentation and provide important information to assist job-seekers and career counselors in improving the speed and quality of employment, and to help recruiters to improve recruitment.

Keywords: employer brand; generation Y; recruitment

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This paper studies the preoccupations of young graduates from Generation Y transitioning from education to employment. Reviewing job search and employer brand literature, we update graduates' preferences for employer brand benefits in their initial job search. Using conjoint analysis on a French sample (N = 592), we demonstrate that, even if on the whole they prefer job security and a relaxed work atmosphere, their expectations are heterogeneous. The results also show that the Internet is far from being the first medium used by these young 'digital natives' graduates for the job search. This research lead to discuss the relevance of the concepts of Generation Y and generational segmentation and provide important information to assist job-seekers and career counselors in improving the speed and quality of employment, and to help recruiters to improve recruitment.

KEYWORDS: conjoint analysis; digital natives; employer brand; generational segmentation; Generation Y; recruitment.

INTRODUCTION

Attracting talent is a perennial difficulty for organizations and, considering the demographic trends in Western economies, is likely to become even greater in the coming years. Previous researches have shown that a quality workforce gives a competitive advantage to organizations and is an important source of organizational and financial success for firms (Huselid, 1995). The retirement of baby boomers cause recruitment problems, which could be compounded by a lack of new graduates. Particularly salient in the competition for talent is the ability to attract qualified individuals –Bachelors as well as Masters graduates (Montgomery and Ramus, 2011). Moreover, firms must attract new recruits from among a relatively small generation, the Generation Y. In its broadest definition, the appellation refers

to people born between 1977 and 1994 (Bush *et al.*, 2004). In recent years, academic research and managerial literature have examined the concept of generation, with a particular focus on Generation Y (e.g. Eisner, 2005; Broadbridge *et al.*, 2007; Terjesen *et al.*, 2007).

Today the question for firms is how to attract employees belonging to Generation Y. This generation is depicted as having differing values, attitudes, behaviors or expectations than previous generations and stereotypes are associated with Generation Y (Parry and Urwin, 2011). Faced with Generation Y applicants, firms are wondering whether they should adapt their recruitment strategy. While this question is a preoccupation for managers, so far few researches have been conducted in order to provide theoretical or managerial knowledge on this topic. The job search literature establishes that if companies want to attract young graduates, they need to develop a better understanding of their expectations and to know what job and organizational characteristics influence them during their job searches (Montgomery and Ramus, 2011). To reinforce their capacity to recruit young graduates, some firms have already decided to use the concept of the employer brand, that is, the benefits associated with a job or an employer and their promotion inside and outside the firm (Ambler and Barrow, 1996). The underlying hypothesis of the concept is that the desirability of a firm depends on the potential applicant's perception of the attributes associated with it.

Furthermore, Generation Y is a group that has grown up with the digital media. Several terms are used to differentiate generations born after 1983 from older generations because of their assumed exposure, experience, and/or emersion with digital technology (Page and Mapstone, 2010): 'Digital Natives', 'Net Generation', 'Millennial Generation'... Differences include preferring more active to passive learning, having distinct information search patterns, and a lower tolerance for delays. For their recruitment, firms are developing their communication on the digital medias (Parry and Tyson, 2008) while questioning whether this strategy is the most relevant to attract young graduates.

Today research in recruitment implies knowledge of young graduates belonging to Generation Y. Three research questions are explored:

- What are their expectations of a future employer: which employer brand attributes guide young graduates from Generation Y in their job choice decisions?
- Are these expectations homogeneous within Generation Y?
- Do young graduates from Generation Y prefer the use of Internet tools rather than non-Internet tools in their search for employment?

The object of this study is to contribute to answering these questions, to understand how recruitment strategy should be adapted to the new graduates of the Generation Y and to discuss the stereotypes associated with Generation Y and the relevance of applying the concepts of generation and generational segmentation to recruitment.

This research contributes to study Generation Y alone and will not provide evidence of the differences between generations but some useful insights into the preferences of this single generation (Parry and Urwin, 2011). This choice leads to exclude the effects of career stage, a recurrent problem in generational analyses. The second contribution is the use of conjoint analysis, an original data collection methodology. Conjoint analysis is a sophisticated experimental, real-time technique that overcomes limitations of direct ratings research into decision making and is thus likely to generate more accurate results.

After stating our theoretical framework, we present the methodology and results of an empirical study of young graduates entering the job market. Discussion of this case sheds light on the research questions from both a theoretical and managerial standpoint.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Job search and employer brand

Job search is a dynamic decision-making process where job and organizational attributes affect final choice (Rynes and Barber, 1990; Boswell *et al.*, 2003; Montgomery and Ramus,

2011). These attributes are dominant because they have a direct positive effect on applicants' attraction to the firm and influence the decision to accept or reject a job offer (Turban *et al.*, 1998). From Jurgensen (1978), many researchers have attempted to identify job attributes and applicants' job preferences.

The employer brand can be defined as the sum of benefits associated with a job and an employer (Ambler and Barrow, 1996; Berthon *et al.*, 2005; Lievens, 2007). The bases of the employer brand can be found in marketing practices. Ambler and Barrow (1996) assert that brand management techniques can be applied to employment situations. As in the case of branded products, the literature relies on the hypothesis that potential applicants are attracted to a firm due to their perception of its attributes and benefits and the image of the employer brand (Ambler and Barrow, 1996). This definition implies that the employer brand includes the promotion, inside and outside the firm, of a clear idea of what makes the firm different and desirable as an employer. A strong employer brand can help reduce recruitment costs, improve relations with staff, improve employee retention, and even allow a firm to offer lower salaries than those paid by firms with a weaker brand (Berthon *et al.*, 2005).

The job search and employer brand literatures both examine applicants' job preferences: while the job search literature tries to identify preferences in order to attract employees, the employer brand literature also examines how employer brand can influence young graduates' intention to apply.

Generation Y and generational segmentation

Four approaches to the notion of generation can be distinguished (Kertzer, 1983): (1) the demographic sense, (2) the genealogical and family sense, (3) the historical sense and (4) the socio-cognitive or sociological sense i.e. a "generational cohort". Research on Generation Y is related to the fourth perspective. The majority of studies have compared four generations in terms of birth years but there is little agreement on the composition of each generation

between researchers (Parry and Urwin, 2011). The most current definitions of generational groups are:

- Veterans (or 'Silent Generation', 'Matures', 'Traditionalists') born between 1925 and 1942;
- Baby boomers born between 1943 and 1960;
- Generation X (or 'Thirteenth', 'Baby Busters', 'Lost Generation') born between 1961 and 1981;
- Generation Y (or 'Millenials', 'Nexters', 'Echo Boomers') born after 1982.

From this socio-cognitive perspective, according to socialization theory, individuals of each generation are influenced by the political, economic or cultural context in which they evolve and the historic events that shape their values (Mannheim, 1952). Due to the power of these shared events, each generation is thought to develop a unique set of beliefs and attitudes that guide its behavior (Ryder, 1965).

Due to the age of individuals comprising Generation Y, researchers were first interested in them as consumers (Noble *et al.*, 2009). Thus, generational marketing was developed in order to understand a singular lifestyle to which a generation aspires (Wolburg and Pokrywczynski, 2001) and this singularity sometimes justifies use of generational segmentation, presented as a means of market segmentation (Noble *et al.*, 2003).

Over the last years, this generation has entered the job market and this raises many questions concerning its attitude toward the world of work as well as the means firms could use to attract and retain its members. For all aspects of people management (recruitment, training and development, career development, rewards and working arrangements, management style), Generation Y is presented as different from previous generations (Parry and Urwin, 2011). However, despite the popularity of this topic, there has been little academic work to

examine Generation Y as future employees, while the notion of generation itself is called into question, in particular as a relevant segmentation criterion.

While the notion of generation has been used in many studies, the theory of cohorts, i.e. the idea of each generation developing a unique set of beliefs and attitudes that guide behaviors, is in fact called into question. First, researchers do not agree on how to define a generation. Thus, Generation X could overlap with Generation Y (Parry and Urwin, 2011). Furthermore, studies underline the fact that people born at the very start or end of a generation do not resemble those born in the middle (Wellner, 2000). Secondly, stereotypes are commonly assigned to different generations, but these stereotypes change with time (Wolburg and Pokrywczynski, 2001). While individuals are indeed easily influenced in their youth and can be marked by certain beliefs and attitudes for life, they are still capable of changing according to experiences in adult life. Finally, perceptions of shared events can differ, notably according to gender, ethnic group or social class (Parry and Urwin, 2011).

The use of generational segmentation is also questioned. Indeed, strong inter-group heterogeneity and intra-group homogeneity are prerequisites for valid segmentation. The problem is that there can be sub-groups within a single generation, which calls into question the postulate of intra-generational homogeneity (Parry and Urwin, 2011). Moreover, heterogeneity between generations is sometimes questioned (Jurgensen, 1978; Reisenwitz and Iyer, 2009).

Generation Y and employer brands benefits

Since Jurgensen (1978), empirical research has been conducted on job seekers' preferred job attributes. On this topic, the most recent studies have investigated the Generation Y.

Studies reveal that Generation Y prefer a positive work environment and stimulating work that offers opportunities for advancement and long-term career progression (Eisner, 2005; Broadbridge *et al.*, 2007; Terjesen *et al.*, 2007). Generation Y is attracted to organizations that

invested in training and development (Broadbridge *et al.*, 2007; Terjesen *et al.*, 2007) and allowed variety in their daily work (Terjesen *et al.*, 2007). They also have a strong need for independence and autonomy (Bush *et al.*, 2004; Cennamo and Gardner, 2008). Used to taking part in family decisions, they are ready to provide input in the workplace, thus encouraging a collective management style and a supportive culture (Eisner, 2005; Broadbridge *et al.*, 2007) and are attentive to work-life balance, particularly young graduates preparing to enter the job market (Eisner, 2005; Cennamo and Gardner, 2008), and to personal enjoyment (Broadbridge *et al.*, 2007). The literature is less consistent when it comes to Generation Y's salary expectations. Some researchers suggest that they consider salary less important than other attributes, such as a fulfilling private life (Eisner, 2005), while others suggest that it is a major concern (Qenani-Petrela *et al.*, 2007; Lowe *et al.*, 2008). Montgomery and Ramus (2011) show a preference for intellectual challenge before geographic area and financial package.

Compared to Baby Boomers and Generation X, Generation Y is presented as more motivated by progression and by being in an affiliative workplace but less motivated by power (Wong *et al.*, 2008). A study in the hospitality industry shows that Generation Y value economic return and work environment more highly than Baby Boomers or Generation X did and is less concerned about personal growth such as intellectual stimulation and achievement (Chen and Choi, 2008). Bristow *et al.* (2011) examine the motivational factors of Gen-Y students who are interested in professional selling careers and compare the results with the same study conducted two decades before with Gen-X students. Using Herzberg's two-factor theory, they establish that Gen-Y students rate "hygiene" (*vs.* "satisfier") factors (job security, supervision, fringe benefits, coworkers and working conditions) as significantly more important than did Gen-X students.

Studies provide some useful insights into the values of the Generation Y and the differences between generations. They support some stereotypes associated to Generation Y. However,

those studies have methodological limits, and the question of the intragroup homogeneity is rarely, if ever, mentioned.

Generation Y, job search and digital media

Members of Generation Y have grown up in a world dominated by media and are presented as avid users (Bush *et al.*, 2004). The term ‘digital natives’ is used to refer to a generational cohort supposed to be different compared to older generations because of their assumed exposure, experience, and/or emersion with digital technology (Page and Mapstone, 2010). Generation Y is described as being predisposed to new technologies, using several media simultaneously and being constantly on line (Eisner, 2005). Generations born after 1983 are said to prefer more active to passive learning, having distinct information search patterns, and a lower tolerance for delays (Page and Mapstone, 2010). Concerning recruitment, it appears that the Internet has become one of the most popular sources of information among job seekers (Backhaus, 2004). Moreover, students and recent graduates view the digital media as a key means of gathering information on potential employers, while word-of-mouth is more important for experienced employees, i.e. those belonging to previous generations (Van Leeuwen *et al.*, 2005). Familiarity with the Internet should lead individuals from Generation Y to favor this medium in their search for employment, notably when they first enter the job market. Recruitment communication is used to attract the right profiles from within a pool of applicants (Backhaus, 2004). To attract the best employees, a firm can use recruitment advertising in order to promote its employer brand and to be considered an “employer of choice” (Gatewood *et al.*, 1993; Berthon *et al.*, 2005).

The above literature review shows that there exist only a few studies dealing with the Generation Y expectations vis-a-vis a future employer, and that their results are not consistent. Moreover, there are few studies on online recruitment and no study on the use of the Internet by Generation Y for job search while companies increasingly use the digital

media. Finally, the concept of employer brand is rarely applied to Generation Y samples. These findings lead us to a more global research question: is the use of the concept of Generation Y relevant in the field of recruitment?

METHODOLOGY

This research deals with graduates' job preferences as they prepare their education-to-work transition and start their job search. We aim to identify young applicants' expectations about future jobs—that is, the attributes they would like to benefit from. We collected their preferences using conjoint analysis. Conjoint analysis is a technique that can be used to identify individuals' preferences by examining how they deal with options in a decision-making scenario (Green and Srinivasan, 1990). In this study, we are interested in analyzing the preferences of young graduates when choosing a future employer. The use of conjoint analysis to address the research questions put forward in this paper is relevant, in that this method places the respondent in a situation that is similar to reality and avoids rationalization bias. It is a sophisticated, experimental, real-time technique that overcomes limitations of post-hoc and self-reported (direct) ratings research into individuals' decision making and is thus likely to generate more accurate results. Furthermore, conjoint analysis was already used by Moy (2006) in order to improve understanding of the selection decision process of recruiters.

This study was conducted in three phases. The identification of attributes implies, first, taking into consideration specific characteristics of the research theme in order to select the sample of the conjoint analysis. Implementation of conjoint analysis requires, secondly, identifying the determinant attributes and defining the levels of these attributes. This method served to collect data for building the attribute list for the conjoint experiment in phase three.

Phase one: selection of the sample

It is well known that level of education influences job preferences (Jurgensen, 1978). In Europe, the Bologna Process has led to the construction of a European Higher Education Area and the standardization and compatibility of qualifications. In France, the Bologna Process led to the simplification of the former system of higher education awards and the creation of the LMD, standing for Licence (first, or Bachelor, degree), Master (Master degree), Doctorat (doctorate). A French student has the choice between taking a Licence Professionnelle or professional BA (two years of tertiary education followed by a year's intensive additional study) or taking a general first degree (Licence générale) followed by a subject-specific Master's degree. The professional BA was created in 1999 and aimed to lead to a new qualification at the intermediate level between qualified technicians' diplomas and engineering or senior management diplomas (Giret, 2011).

However, the French National Institute for Statistics and Economics Studies (INSEE) distinguishes between five-year degrees (Level I) and three- or four-year degrees (Level II). Firms and professional sectors rely on this classification to define employee benefits, so graduates with three-year degrees (Bachelors) and five-year degrees (Masters) are not offered the same package when they join a firm. Young graduates are generally aware of these differences and their choice of future employer is based on different attributes and levels of attribute.

In order to confirm these differences and select a sample for the study, a preliminary series of interviews was conducted with professional BA and Masters students who were planning to enter the job market immediately on graduation. The results of these interviews show that they are not interested in the same attributes or in the same levels of attributes. For example, "status" (cadre or non-cadre, i.e. a managerial or non-managerial position) has little meaning for Masters graduates as most will find management positions. "Having responsibility" was

the second attribute cited by Masters students, but did not figure in the top 10 attributes among Bachelors. Finally, “salary” applied to both groups, but not at the same levels because their entry-level salaries are not the same. It proved impossible to question a mixed sample of Bachelors and Masters individuals, since they do not make decisions based on the same attributes and levels of attributes. This argued for the use of a homogeneous sample, restricted to a particular course of study. The sample was therefore composed of people taking a professional BA in business studies belonging to Generation Y.

Phase two: attributes and levels selection

At the end of this qualitative phase, the next step was to identify the attributes and levels of attributes of the conjoint analysis. The free elicitation method was used to identify attributes (Steenkamp and Van Trijp, 1997). In free elicitation, respondents are asked to verbalize the attributes they consider relevant in their perception of different alternatives in the subject under investigation. Preliminary interviews were then conducted with six experts (HR managers and researchers and recruitment managers) at the same time as interviews with 54 professional BA students in business studies. A list of 59 words describing the most desirable employer attributes for was obtained. At this stage, salary was the only attribute cited by all the respondents. To select attributes, the students were asked to indicate the most important ones when choosing an employer. The attributes cited by the respondents were ranked by frequency. The top ten attributes that were cited were included in the study. This list corresponds to the attributes most frequently used in the literature (for example Jurgensen, 1978; Lievens and Highhouse, 2003; Montgomery and Ramus, 2011). Since the number of attributes selected was quite large, it was important not to choose too many levels. Moreover, it is better if the levels are larger than reality, but not so large as to be unbelievable (Green and Srinivasan, 1978). Therefore each attribute was given two levels determined by the panel of experts (see Table 1). Any disagreements between the experts were discussed and resolved.

Phase three: the conjoint study

The next phase of the conjoint analysis concerned the construction of a set of profiles. The full profile method was selected (Green and Srinivasan, 1978), with each respondent exposed to a complete set of attribute combinations. Conjoint analysis does not require respondents to evaluate all possible combinations of attributes. A full factorial design of ten attributes with two levels in each would require respondents to evaluate all $2^{10} = 1,024$ profiles. As the fatigue, stress and exhaustion of respondents could be a major problem with 1,024 profiles to evaluate, a data reduction technique, the fractional factorial design, was applied in order to reduce the number of profiles (Green and Srinivasan, 1990). SPSS software was used to reduce the number of profiles for evaluation to 12 and systematically to add two additional (holdout) cards in order to calculate the reliability indices of the conjoint analysis. Therefore, each respondent evaluated 14 profiles. They were asked to give their preference rating (0 = least desirable; 20 = most desirable) to each hypothetical job offer. One decimal place is allowed for the preference rating in order to increase the variability of responses. Thus, rather than examining attributes separately, respondents considered all selected attributes jointly, and provided an indication of their trade-off of these attributes against one another. Using these ratings, we can learn about the relative importance of these attributes in influencing employers' preferences.

The paper questionnaires were distributed at the end of the academic year to new graduates. At this point, they have already had to find a firm for an internship or apprenticeship and have therefore studied job offers and begun to think about their future career. They are also actively starting to prepare their education-to-work transition and looking for a job. Of the 1,507 questionnaires distributed throughout France, 601 were returned by the universities that had agreed to take part in the study. Nine questionnaires were filled in incorrectly or had weak indices and were excluded from the sample. The final sample was made up of 592 new

graduates with a professional BA in business studies, giving a 39 per cent response rate; their ages ranged from 20 to 26 and the sample consisted of 41% men and 59% women. Generation Y has often been described as one of avid Internet users and this is reflected in the sample since 84% of respondents said they used email daily and 98% several times a week. 94% consult MSN, 88% YouTube, 75% Facebook and 72% Dailymotion.

RESULTS

Generation Y job preferences

The results of the conjoint analysis conducted with 592 questionnaires has excellent statistical fit with a Pearson's coefficient (*rho*) of 0.999 and Kendall's *tau* of 0.970.

The first type of result concerns preferences of the respondents in our sample concerning a future employer (*cf.* Table 1).

[INSERT TABLE 1]

Two attributes clearly stand out among these preferences: type of contract (14.23%) and atmosphere at work (13.43%). The type of contract is ranked highest by potential applicants, with a preference for a permanent position, thus guaranteeing job security. Atmosphere is also one of the main benefits expected by the students questioned, which is an original result. This converges with the idea that members of Generation Y prefer to work in a positive environment (Eisner, 2005; Broadbridge *et al.*, 2007).

The other attributes all have percentages in terms of preference between 7.62% (bonuses) and 10.29% (distance of work from home). It is important to note that distance from home is preferred more than attributes such as salary or advancement, contradicting the results of Qenani-Petrela *et al.* (2007), Lowe *et al.* (2008) and Montgomery and Ramus (2011). We can find in our sample the idea that Generation Y is more attracted to a job that offers work-life balance (Eisner, 2005). However, we need to nuance this observation to the extent “working hours”, which also reflects concern for work-life balance, ranks only seventh among

respondents' preferences. Confirming precedent results, Generation Y appears attentive to career opportunities (Eisner, 2005; Broadbridge *et al.*, 2007; Terjesen *et al.*, 2007). Finally, the type of work (varied *vs.* routine tasks) is not one of the preferred attributes, which contradicts the assertion that Generation Y is interested above all in stimulating work (Eisner, 2005). On the contrary, this study shows that the students from Generation Y we questioned are ready, as a trade-off, to accept a less interesting job in order to obtain a permanent job or work in a relaxed atmosphere.

Homogeneity of job preferences

The utilities obtained from the conjoint analysis were used as an input in a cluster analysis in order to find appropriate segments. This classification was performed using Ward's method and SPSS software. It is based on the utilities of one of the two levels of the ten attributes used for the conjoint analysis. Concerning the choice of number of classes, several criteria were used concomitantly: distance on the dendrogram between branches, number of respondents in each class (which must not be too small) and the tests of differences in mean between the various classes for each variable used in the segmentation. The conjunction of these criteria led to a segmentation in four classes (*cf.* Table 2).

[INSERT TABLE 2]

This segmentation highlights the diversity of expectations among young graduates of Generation Y. Therefore, they cannot be considered a homogeneous group that could be targeted indifferently:

- Class 1 (12.3%), "security seekers", is essentially formed around the work contract attribute. These are applicants that are looking above all for job security, and, to a lesser degree, regular working hours.

- Class 2 (53.5%) comprises the “career-minded”, who stand apart from other classes by their desire to work in a prestigious company in which they can climb the corporate ladder. A high salary and permanent contract are also sources of utility for them.
- The “balance seekers” make up class 3 (28.6%). They are interested in the quality of working life and achieving work-life balance, a motivation illustrated by the strong utility associated with a relaxed work environment, a job close to home, regular working hours and varied tasks.
- Class 4 (5.6%) was named “easy-going” due to the significant weighting of atmosphere; the “easy-going” are looking above all for an informal work environment. Surprisingly, they see utility in several levels that were viewed in a negative light by the other respondents: they value low-profile firms, non-management positions and jobs involving routine tasks.

In light of these results, it appears that the students from Generation Y we questioned do not form a homogeneous group.

Internet and non-Internet tools in the job search

Internet use among young graduates of Generation Y in their job search is at the heart of the third research question. In order to examine it, use of the Internet to find information on a future employer was distinguished from use to find a job. In both cases, different tools were proposed to the respondents who were asked to indicate a degree of use intention on a seven-point scale. These tools were divided in groups according to whether they concerned the Internet or not, whether they corresponded to formal or informal channels (Pellizzari, 2010) and whether they involved, or not, social networking (personal relations or digital social networks). Averages of individual responses concerning these six variables were calculated and compared (*cf.* Table 3).

[INSERT TABLE 3]

The members of Generation Y we questioned seemed less interested in using Internet tools than others, either to find information on an employer or to find a job. An in-depth analysis of the data however offered information that completes this result (*cf.* Table 4).

[INSERT TABLE 4]

The results presented in Table 4 reveal a hierarchy in intentions to use different tools to find information or a job. In fact, apparently weak Internet use masks several discrepancies. Online social networking tools (Facebook, Viadeo, LinkedIn...) are rarely envisaged for finding information or a job. Specifically concerning means of finding information, Internet tools are envisaged first. Among them, the most common ones are corporate websites and company recruitment pages and general employment sites (Monster or Keljob, for example) and these are considered before other traditional formal channels such as job fairs. Personal relations and alumni networks come in second. Virtual social networks, Internet forums, blogs or virtual worlds (like Second Life) are rarely used to find information on an employer, even among avid Internet users in the sample.

When it comes to finding a job, relations through family and friends or professional ties are the first to be called on during the job search. In second position, close behind, we found traditional tools outside the applicant's network, either on the Internet (online job offers, résumé banks) or not (ad spec applications, job fairs, classified ads). Finally, virtual social networks seem to be, as in the search for information, rarely used to apply for a job. The purpose of these sites, creating networks of "friends" or "friends of friends", appears to be considered more private than professional.

Therefore, the students questioned do not globally prefer Internet tools over non-Internet tools in preparing their arrival on the job market. Moreover, they tend to use these tools differently depending on the stage in the recruitment process: while formal Internet tools are preferred

when searching for information in general, relations through family and friends or professional ties are the first to be called on during the actual job search.

Through this study we can observe that the students from Generation Y we questioned are a diversified group with varied attitudes toward a future employer and the attributes of the employer brand. For their job search, the channels of communication used are numerous and not exclusively anchored in the real world.

DISCUSSION

The results obtained in this study provide some initial knowledge of the job and employer aspirations of young graduates from Generation Y and their decision-making process during school-to-work transition. This research can be compared to the job search literature and serve as the basis of a discussion about the notions of Generation Y, generational segmentation, job preferences and employer brand in order to formulate recommendations for recruitment and employer brand management.

Generation Y job preferences and the concept of generation

First of all, the relevance of applying the concept of generation to recruitment seems questionable. From the standpoint of cohort theory, the concept implies that it is possible to clearly identify generational cohorts based on date of birth. Thus, if we use the groups defined by Eisner (2005), an individual born in 1979 belongs to Generation X and has adopted the values of that generation while an individual born in 1980 belongs to Generation Y and has adopted its values, which are different from those of the previous one. While studies in demographics or sociology are based on this theoretical perspective and seem to confirm it, our study calls into question the fact that individuals belonging to the same generational cohort necessarily have the same attitudes toward recruitment. Thus, within our sample individuals have shown different attitudes concerning a future employer.

In addition to the problem of defining the concept of generation, we can add the use of the concept of Generation Y in human resource management. Considering the results of this study, it seems that the notion of Generation Y is based on little tangible evidence. Therefore, as the first (qualitative) phase of the study demonstrates, belonging to the same generation is less important than other variables, such as level of education, in influencing criteria for choosing an employer. Moreover, when we examine current managerial practices and discourse, it appears that the term Generation Y is often used to designate a “college graduate”... This lack of clarity does not bode well for its use in human resource management. This study provides some initial knowledge that can be compared to stereotypes of Generation Y. Thus, we can observe certain expectations globally assigned to Generation Y, notably the search for a positive work environment, career progression and work-life balance. Our research indicates that the most important job attribute for new graduates seeking work is the type of contract offered. Graduates want to obtain a permanent position that guarantees job security. This result is consistent with the study conducted by Jurgensen (1978). Thus, our study confirms the importance of attributes like job security, financial benefits, and advancement possibilities. Furthermore, new graduates attach great importance to workplace atmosphere, confirming preceding studies (Eisner, 2005). However, they are more responsive to the distance of their workplace (in contradiction with Montgomery and Ramus, 2011) and less to get a stimulating work or a high salary (in contradiction with Eisner, 2005, Qenani-Petrela *et al.*, 2007 and Lowe *et al.*, 2008). These results show that new graduates are ready, as a trade-off, to accept a less interesting job in order to obtain a permanent job or work in a relaxed atmosphere.

These results therefore lead to a critical analysis of the concept of generation. The concept of generation seems to be a global one, oversimplified compared to the great diversity and increased complexity of the job market. More specifically, young graduates who are looking

for a job, while they may belong to Generation Y, are a more heterogeneous group than the one portrayed in managerial literature. The concept, while interesting in certain contexts, can hardly help managers understand the complexity of the applicants concerned by recruitment.

Generation Y and generational segmentation

Generational segmentation is only meaningful if individuals belonging to the same generation have similar attitudes that are also different from other generations (Noble and Schewe, 2003). Concerning intergenerational differences, there are two valid approaches: asserting that two individuals from two different generations will have different attitudes *at the same age*, or that *at time t* two people from two different generations (an adolescent and a senior citizen, for example) will have different attitudes. In the second case, this means confounding generational segmentation and traditional segmentation by age group. A comparison of the results of this study with the only previous one on the same subject (Jurgensen, 1978) also calls into question the first idea. Jurgensen (1978) studied, from 1945 to 1975, the preferences of applicants toward employers using a list of ten attributes. When we compare our results with those obtained with a similar age group (applicants from 20 to 29 years old at the time of the study), we can observe that current applicants and those of previous generations still prefer job security, an attribute that is ranked highest in both studies. Moreover, it appears that other attributes (career path, salary...) are not ranked much differently. This result converges with those of other studies that conclude there are similarities between baby boomers, Generation X and Generation Y (Wolburg and Pokrywczynski, 2001; Reisenwitz and Iyer, 2009).

This intergroup homogeneity is compounded by another weakness: the absence of intragroup homogeneity. Concerning intragenerational differences, this study indeed highlights four classes within a sub-segment of young people from Generation Y. This sub-segment is

therefore not homogeneous. However, a strictly generational approach would lead to targeting the entire generation in the same way, overlooking differences within it.

Moreover, socialization theory, according to which the individual's social, political, economic and technological environment shapes generational values and behaviors, especially among young adults (Parry and Urwin, 2011), is called into question by this study because preferences are extremely heterogeneous within a homogeneous sample from Generation Y. There are several explanations for this. The first is that socialization linked to a microenvironment (the family, for example) can have a more significant impact than socialization linked to the macroenvironment (historic events that influence cohorts). Secondly, the idea that an individual is formed by life experiences and that all individuals within a generation share the same experiences, and therefore will have the same attitudes, is questionable. Indeed, a major historic event is shared not only by the individuals of one generation, but by members of all the others as well. Therefore, individuals who have experienced similar events can have completely different values, whatever their age (Noble and Schewe, 2003). Furthermore, even if common values can influence preferences (Noble *et al.*, 2003), neither values, nor preferences are necessarily correlated with an individual's age, and therefore his generation, which challenges the very question of generational segmentation. Most research on Generation Y postulates that its members are identical, while individuals clearly have different motivations at age 20 and age 30. In order to differentiate Generation Y from other generations it seems necessary to divide it into several sub-segments rather than to consider it globally. Different criteria could be used to segment Generation Y. For example, in this study, preferences of young graduates were significantly different according to gender: women were more interested than men in an interesting job (the utility associated with varied tasks was significantly higher for women) and regular working hours. Professional experience also influences preferences: students who had done an internship

during their studies were more interested in a relaxed work environment than students in work-study programs (who had more professional experience) who were more interested in chances for advancement. Geographical location (students from Paris or the provinces) also stands out as a relevant segmentation criterion. Parisians were more interested in salary or management status while the distance between work and home was significantly more important for students from other regions.

Globally these results highlight the difficulty of assigning truly generational attitudes to young graduates from Generation Y. While the concept of generation is naturally of interest in human resource management, it does not seem to be a relevant criterion for recruitment.

Implications for practice

Faced with a new generation of graduates, firms may feel disarmed and base their recruitment strategies on common stereotypes that portray young people as constantly browsing the web and only interested in salary. Based on the study of a sub-segment within Generation Y, our research questions these stereotypes and allows us to formulate some recommendations for managers whose target is Generation Y.

The job selection process can be described as a series of decisions made by the applicant in order to know with which organizations and for which type of job he will continue the process in order to obtain employment. The process starts with an individual assessment of information from recruitment sources such as print advertisements, media messages and personal relations (Gatewood *et al.*, 1993). When designing recruitment communications it is therefore important to carefully select communication channels as well as the content of messages targeting Generation Y.

In an initial phase, concerning media, many firms decide, in order to reach Generation Y, to use the Internet, based on the supposition their target uses this medium heavily, even exclusively, or because traditional media have not been effective in reaching this group.

However, the results of this study tend to indicate that, contrary to popular conceptions, young graduates from Generation Y use all media, both traditional sources and Internet, to find general information or a job. To attract a wide range of applicants, firms should advertise their job offers, in particular but not exclusively, on their corporate website. This recommendation is all the more acute in that the young people we questioned use the Internet, in general, and social networks in particular, for private reasons (communicating with friends, creating a network to share fun activities...). While submitting résumés on the web (on corporate websites or résumé banks) is becoming more common, this means of contacting firms still remains one of many options and traditional channels (ad spec applications, responses to job offers...) are preferred. Moreover, as for previous generations, the members of Generation Y we questioned have understood the importance of “real” networks in finding information and a job (Granovetter, 1974). The real “gap” is between those who have a network and those who do not, rather than between avid and occasional web users.

In a second phase, concerning content, different studies underline the fact that Generation Y has grown up in a world dominated by the media and has a negative view of advertising, which is perceived as a form of manipulation (Wolburg and Pokrywczynski, 2001). However, recruitment advertising is used to attract the right profiles from a pool of potential applicants. Successful communication lies in finding the right words to arouse interest among the desired profiles and encourage them to continue the recruitment process. Understanding the effectiveness of recruitment advertising content is just as important for recruiters as the desirability of product attributes is for marketers (Backhaus, 2004). However, the literature provides little information on the attributes that could be used for effective differentiation (Lievens and Highhouse, 2003). In this perspective, this study provides useful results for firms. Firms should therefore not only understand the stakes associated with their employer

brand and its desirability, but also carefully manage the employer brand for recruitment purposes.

CONCLUSION

This study provides some initial knowledge about young graduates' expectations of the job market and their future employers. Among employer brand attributes, young graduates from Generation Y, on the whole, have a preference for job security and a relaxed work atmosphere. However, their expectations are not homogeneous what leads to discuss the relevance of the concepts of Generation Y and generational segmentation. The results also show that the Internet is far from being the first medium used by these young 'digital natives' graduates for the job search. This research highlights the risks associated with the use of the concept of Generation Y in the field of recruitment.

This study has some limitations that can affect its external validity. First, the decision to question only first degree graduates limits the possibilities of generalizing the results. Second, the conjoint analysis measured preferences for attributes. While great care was taken in the choice of attributes and their respective levels, as well as construction of the profiles, certain attributes could have had different meanings for the respondents. Finally, this study suffers from the lack of previous research on the subject and on the same population, limiting the possibilities of comparison.

Additional research is therefore essential, notably in order to improve the external validity of this study. This must be demonstrated by reproducing it in other contexts and with different populations (for example, graduates with a Master's degree, who have different preferences from graduates with a first degree, those with no degree or new graduates in other countries).

This research deals with new graduate job seekers as they begin their search. However, some studies show that firms' recruitment processes and recruiter behaviors influence applicant attraction (Boswell *et al.*, 2003; Montgomery and Ramus, 2011). Recruiters have an indirect

effect on attraction by influencing perceptions of important job and organizational attributes (Turban *et al.*, 1998). Future research could study applicants' preferences before and during the recruitment process in order to compare them and to understand the evolution of their preferences for job attributes and employer brand benefits.

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TABLES

Table 1: Results of the conjoint analysis

Attributes	Levels	Average utilities	Average importance
Type of contract	Short-term Permanent	- 1.0558 + 1.0558	0.1423
Atmosphere	Stressful Relaxed	- 0.8392 + 0.8392	0.1343
Distance	15 minutes 1 hour	+ 0.6241 - 0.6241	0.1029
Career path	Limited advancement Possible management position	- 0.5706 + 0.5706	0.0976
Salary	€1,300 €1,500	- 0.6801 + 0.6801	0.0973
Type of work	Varied tasks Routine tasks	+ 0.5237 - 0.5237	0.0928
Hours	Regular (9 to 5) Irregular (some evenings and weekends)	+ 0.4140 - 0.4140	0.0916
Reputation	Prestigious Not prestigious	+ 0.4611 - 0.4611	0.0874
Status	Manager Non-manager	+0.3332 - 0.3332	0.0775
Bonuses	13 th month None	+ 0.4026 - 0.4026	0.0762

Table 2: Utility of attribute levels for the four classes

Attribute levels	Security seekers (n = 73)	Career-minded (n = 317)	Balance seekers (n = 169)	Easy-going (n = 33)	Total (n = 592)	F
Prestigious firm	0.3553	0.6189	0.3503	- 0.2538	0.4611	11.193***
Relaxed atmosphere	0.6190	0.1907	1.5136	4.1023	0.8392	169.125***
€1,500 monthly salary	0.6755	0.6356	0.7922	0.5442	0.6801	1.555
13 th month	0.4780	0.3373	0.4652	0.5417	0.4026	1.736
Management status	0.4558	0.2895	0.4761	- 0.2487	0.3332	7.883***
Permanent	3.2086	0.7338	0.8390	0.4962	1.0558	139.573***
Varied tasks	0.2834	0.5423	0.7586	- 0.3270	0.5237	14.059***
Distance 15 min	0.4763	0.3540	1.1881	0.6578	0.6241	30.360***
Regular hours	0.6139	0.1323	0.8607	0.3902	0.4140	19.552***
Possible management position	0.4569	0.7115	0.4075	0.3043	0.5706	5.047***

*** p < 0.001

Table 3: Intention of using different tools to find information and a job – general results

	Average	Standard deviation	T
Finding information on the Internet	4.1522	0.82523	13.840***
Finding information without the Internet	4.8408	1.10191	
Finding information through formal channels	5.3686	0.99292	36.593***
Finding information through informal channels	3.4762	0.93657	
Finding a job on the Internet	4.2009	1.09095	21.437***
Finding a job without the Internet	5.1760	0.79853	
Finding a job through a network	4.7741	1.14762	-4.252***
Finding a job without a network	5.0266	0.92453	

*** p < 0.001

Table 4: Intention of using different tools to find information and a job – detailed results

	Average	Standard deviation
Finding information on the Internet through formal channels	5.4852 ^a	1.05645
Finding information without the Internet through formal channels	4.9347	1.50588
Finding information on the Internet through informal channels	2.8106	1.16124
Finding information without the Internet through informal channels	4.7895	1.21414
Finding a job on the Internet and through a network	2.5155 ^b	1.66175
Finding a job without the Internet and through a network	5.3272	1.33473
Finding a job on the Internet and without a network	5.0335	1.23899
Finding a job without the Internet and without a network	5.0052	0.92646

^a T-tests are all significant at the 0.1 percent level, except means for finding information without the Internet by formal or informal channels, which are significantly different at the 5 percent level.

^b T-tests are all significant at the 0.1 percent level, except means for finding a job with or without the Internet and without a network, which are not significantly different.