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Digital Natives and Signalling in Employment Interviews: An Inquiry into the Acceptance and Perceived Fairness of Different Interview Modes[**]

Abstract

The paper investigates the signalling behaviour of digital native applicants in employment interviews and analyses how their reactions differ in face-to-face versus video-mediated contexts. The social presence within the interview setting and the possibility of employing impression management tactics are of particular interest to understanding the subjective acceptance and perceived fairness of the two types of selection procedures. The analyses of novel primary data from a German survey with 513 valid responses reveal that digital natives, similar to older applicants, appreciate signalling to lower information asymmetries. Regardless of interview mode, social presence and impression management are strong positive drivers of acceptance and perceived fairness. While members of the generational cohort still accept face-to-face interviews more than those mediated by videoconferencing technology, they perceive the former as less fair. This result, which may be explained by the specific characteristics of digital natives, contradicts the findings of studies that have investigated preceding generations. Hence, the paper complements the literature on applicant reactions by focusing on two younger generational cohorts, namely Generation Y and Z. Furthermore, the adoption of the signalling framework in this context suggests that the beneficial effects of signalling may stand vis-à-vis feelings of unfairness, which can be interpreted as additional psychological costs that are driven by moral considerations.

Introduction

Employment interviews are a central element of recruitment processes and remain the most popular selection method (Huffcutt & Culbertson, 2011, p. 185). Increasingly, employers leverage modern information and communication technology to conduct them in video-mediated forms. This allows the interviewer and the

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interviewee to remain in different physical locations, facilitating benefits such as cost- and time-savings, flexibility, and higher efficiency on both sides (Basch & Melchers, 2020; Chapman & Webster, 2003). Not least, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of videoconference (VC) interviews has increased significantly and is likely to become common practice in post-pandemic times. However, existing research has identified several pitfalls and points to an underestimated effect of technology-mediated interviews on recruitment and selection outcomes (McColl & Michelotti, 2019). For example, interviewees remain sceptical about technology-mediated interviews, as evidenced by inferior reactions (Straus et al., 2001). Compared to face-to-face procedures (hereinafter referred to as F2F), applicants accept VC interviews less and perceive them as less fair (Blacksmith et al., 2016). Furthermore, remote candidates tend to score lower in interviewer ratings (Basch et al., 2021; Sears et al., 2013). Recent studies have identified impaired social presence and limited possibilities to employ impression management (IM) tactics – i.e., verbal and non-verbal cues, which are known to augment interview performance (Barrick et al., 2009) – as important mediating factors that explain applicants' negative reactions to VC interviews (Basch et al., 2020).

Individuals born in the 1980s and thereafter accept and use advanced communication tools such as instant messaging, video calls or audio notes more compared to previous generations (Hurrelmann & Albrecht, 2021, p. 59; Wang et al., 2013), not least because they have been exposed to an increasing omnipresence of digital technologies while growing up. In combination with the significantly improved media richness of digital channels, it appears reasonable to expect that the negative effects of video-mediated employment interviews will disappear as more millennials and succeeding generations enter the workforce or switch jobs. However, empirical research dedicated to analysing the reactions and preferences of applicants from younger generational cohorts (i.e. following the baby boomers and Generation X) remains scarce, especially when real recruitment settings are investigated. A notable exception is Chapman et al. (2003), whose analysis is based on survey data that was collected among university students more than 20 years ago. Recent studies typically run experiments that simulate interviews or ask participants questions regarding hypothetical recruitment situations (e.g. Basch et al., 2020; Proost et al., 2021; Sears et al., 2013), raising concerns over the findings' validity.

Understanding the factors that influence interviewees' impressions of and reactions to different selection procedures is highly important, as behavioural and emotional responses can influence recruitment outcomes such as performance on selection tests, job acceptance behaviour and subsequent job performance (McCarthy et al., 2017). In times of labour shortage, recruiters cannot afford to lose valuable human resources due to avoidable shortcomings in the hiring process. By addressing the following research questions, the paper at hand extends the literature on candidate behaviour in employment interviews, illuminates the responses caused by the two

most popular interview modes and sheds light on the consequences of interviewee behaviour:

RQ1:   *How does the signalling of applicants impact the acceptance of F2F and VC employment interviews as selection procedures in recruitment processes, and how does the signalling of applicants impact the perceived fairness of these interviews?*

RQ2:   *Which (additional) factors influence the acceptance and perceived fairness of the two types of interviews?*

The study focuses on the two generational cohorts that are most relevant for today's and tomorrow's human resource managers in their pursuit to recruit sufficient human resources: First, Generation Y, to which individuals belong that were born between the years 1981 and 1996 (Dimock, 2019), also known as millennials. Second Generation Z, with their members born between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock, 2019). At the end of 2022, 28.3 million Germans, approximately a third of the country's population, belonged to these two cohorts (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2023). A shared characteristic of both generations is their 'natural' acquaintance and familiarity with digital technologies, which has inspired the overarching term 'digital native' for individuals born in the 1980s and later (Prensky, 2001a). Against this background, the answers to the above research questions may prove helpful for human resource practitioners to select the most suitable interview format in a given recruitment situation and conduct interviews, regardless of mode, that are highly accepted and perceived as fair among hired as well as rejected applicants. Furthermore, the research complements those studies that merely describe the stereotypical characteristics of the generations by analysing quantitative data and modelling the perceptions of digital natives in real recruitment situations. Beyond the practical contribution, the empirical application of the signalling framework in the context of employment interviews with jobseekers belonging to specific generational cohorts points to how shared values and moral considerations, formed by socialisation processes, cause emotional responses in applicants that may be interpreted as additional psychological costs of signalling, even for honest signalers. Such effects have largely remained out of focus in previous studies but are important to consider (Donath, 2011, p. 21) as they are capable of influencing the signalling behaviour of individuals. By addressing this gap in the scientific literature, the paper may initiate a further theoretical elaboration and empirical investigation of a widely overlooked aspect of signalling.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. In section two, signalling theory is reviewed as the conceptual framework within which hypotheses regarding the acceptance and perceived fairness of F2F and VC interviews are developed. Moreover, key characteristics of members of the generation of digital natives are described, which motivates additional hypotheses. Section three explains the data

and outlines the methodological approach before the empirical results are presented in section four. Their discussion follows in section five, along with the formulation of managerial recommendations. The paper closes with a brief summary, its limitations and suggestions for future research.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

Signalling Theory: The Applicant Perspective

The economic relevance and value of signalling as an approach to reduce the uncertainties of transactions, in which information asymmetries between and potentially opportunistic behaviour of the involved parties exist, was first recognised by Spence (1973). Since then, the theoretical framework has been applied in countless management contexts (e.g., Ahlers et al., 2015; Attah-Boakye et al., 2022; Connelly et al., 2011; Essman et al., 2021; Opitz & Hofmann, 2014; Schepker et al., 2018). With regard to human resource management, signalling theory is particularly well suited to study problems concerning recruitment and selection (e.g., Folger et al., 2022; Franck & Opitz, 2007; Jones et al., 2014; McColl & Michelotti, 2019; Roulin & Bangerter, 2013; Schmitz et al., 2021; Schmoll & Süß, 2019; Wilhelmy et al., 2017). As acknowledged by Spence (1973), job markets feature a multitude of informational gaps for both involved parties, i.e., employers and applicants. For the purpose of the study at hand, we exclusively focus on the perspective of the applicant and elaborate on the "signaling game" (Spence, 1973, p. 356) that is played by the candidate to lower the employer's uncertainty. The latter mainly results from ex-ante missing or inaccurate information about a candidate's quality and intent (Stiglitz, 2000). In order to be perceived as a superior applicant vis-à-vis rivals in the recruitment process and receive a job offer, an individual must transmit valid and credible pieces of information, in other words, signals, such as observable characteristics and attributes that allow the employer to infer that the candidate offers productive capabilities. While some characteristics are fixed (e.g., age, race and sex), others are alterable and can be manipulated by the individual, albeit at some cost – education being a prime example here.

Jobseekers, regardless of age, are conscious of the need to communicate their underlying quality to potential employers from the very beginning of any recruitment procedure and will do so if signals exist or can be constructed at a reasonable cost. Thus, written or recorded initial application documents typically include a plethora of signals and social networking websites are increasingly used to complement traditional sources (Roulin & Bangerter, 2013). In subsequent job interviews, recruiters can challenge and validate signals, and candidates have an opportunity to transmit additional cues with the objective of further influencing recruitment decisions in their favour. From the perspective of the applicant, a personal, empathic, and warm atmosphere during an interview facilitates signaling activities: In friendly contexts, candidates may feel more confident to talk about themselves, may be encouraged to

do so or may simply be given more room to send cues and elaborate on them extensively. Hence, the construct of 'social presence', which is defined as the feeling of the presence of the conversation partner, determined by facial expressions, gestures, para-verbal information and the overall perception of mutual awareness (Short et al., 1976), can be regarded as a facilitator and important condition for signalling activities. Consequently, jobseekers' fundamental reactions to selection procedures, independent of their results, should differ by the degree of social presence observed. More precisely, interviewees should react positively to high social presence settings in which they find it easy to establish 'connections' with recruiters (vs. cold and impersonal interviews).

Positive reactions may be differentiated in high acceptance and high perceived fairness, whereby both rely on ex-post subjective evaluations of the interview by the interviewee. Acceptance is understood as the degree to which a certain system satisfies the needs of its users and is hence considered useful (van der Laan et al., 1997; Adell et al., 2014). Perceived fairness, on the other hand, is the result of a psychological process during which an applicant forms a fairness perception of the selection procedure in which she participates (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998, p. 1). This definition focuses on procedural justice, which is, for example, determined by the existence of feedback loops, interpersonal effectiveness of the HR administrators and two-way communication (Gilliland, 1993); it ignores the distributive component as put forth by Greenberg (1987). These considerations translate into the first set of hypotheses:

H1a: The stronger the social presence in job interviews, the higher the acceptance of the overall interview as a selection method.

H1b: The stronger the social presence in job interviews, the higher the perceived fairness of the overall interview.

Impression management is the adoption of verbal, para-verbal and non-verbal behaviour by individuals "to control the impressions others form of them" (Leary & Kowalski, 1990, p.34) during social interaction (Schlenker, 1980). Research has shown that applicants frequently adopt various IM tactics in employment interviews (Bolino et al., 2008; Stevens & Kristof, 1995). Assertive IM entails the self-promotion of one's skills, competencies, and characteristics in order to stand out from competing applicants and signal that one is a good job applicant. For example, by emphasising potential strengths or claiming responsibility for accomplishments, candidates may improve the interviewer's perception. Levashina et al. (2014) show that this type of IM has the strongest impact on interviewer ratings. Moreover, candidates may signal opinion conformity vis-à-vis interviewers or adopt defensive verbal tactics by apologising to attenuate negative impressions (Levashina et al., 2014). Para-verbal IM refers to how individuals say what they say – it includes volume, speed and voice intonation. In addition, non-verbal behaviour

may be used to evoke interpersonal attraction, thereby influencing the outcomes of recruitment processes (Frauendorfer & Schmid Mast, 2015). Such IM tactics include but may not be limited to systematic eye contact, positive facial expressions (e.g. smiling), supportive gestures and self-confident posture. Mirroring the body language of recruiters may further create a sense of similarity, which has been shown to increase interpersonal affect and lead to higher perceived competence (Howard & Ferris, 1996). Independent of the specific tactic used, IM is classified into honest versus deceptive behaviour (Gilmore & Ferris, 1989). In the latter case, candidates may distort true facts by inventing qualifications, embellishing prior accomplishments and omitting or masking undesirable characteristics as well as experiences (Levashina & Campion, 2007).

Given that IM entails proactively directing cues with complementary content to recruiters to lower information asymmetries, IM can be interpreted as an intense signalling approach in interview contexts (Donath, 2011). The more candidates are able to convey such cues that signal their superior quality, regardless of whether the cues are valid indicators of candidates' real competencies or not, the more they are potentially able to influence election outcomes in their favour. Transmitted signals, however, do not unconditionally lead to positive outcomes – for example, the level of training of the recruiter (Howard & Ferris, 1996) or the structure of the interview (Levashina et al., 2014; Tsai et al., 2005) are moderating factors. Moreover, a reasonable IM intensity, before detrimental effects such as impaired credibility materialise, may depend on the specific recruitment situation (e.g., position, level, industry, etc.). Nevertheless, in general, applicants appreciate interview settings that allow the employment of IM tactics and adopt them when possible. Hence, from the perspective of the individual interviewee, the more a candidate is able to employ IM, the more positive the reaction to an interview should be. This leads to the second set of hypotheses:

H2a: The higher the opportunities to employ impression management tactics in job interviews, the higher the acceptance of the overall interview as a selection method.

H2b: The higher the opportunities to employ impression management tactics in job interviews, the higher the perceived fairness of the overall interview.

Digital Natives and Signalling

Members of generational cohorts share certain life stages and undergo similar experiences, which in turn influence their opinions, attitudes and behaviour (Schewe & Noble, 2000). Consequently, individuals born within specific time periods are believed to exhibit common characteristics that can persist throughout their lives (Parry & Urwin, 2011). Complementary to the well-known cohorts Generation Y (i.e. millennials) and Generation Z, the broader terms 'digital natives' (Prensky,

2001a) and 'digital naturals' (Young & Åkerström, 2016) focus on individuals' acquaintance with and usage of digital technologies. The former term is based on the assumption that persons born in or after the year 1980 (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005, p. 72; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008, p. 1; Wang et al., 2013) have been exposed to and socialised with digital technologies since their early childhood (Prensky, 2001a). Although the omnipresence of personal computers, video games, e-mails, messaging services, graphic interfaces, mobile phones and social networks in the cohort members' daily lives has not altered thinking patterns (as was conjectured by Prensky, 2001a), learning preferences and styles differ in their details from earlier generations (Bennett et al., 2008; Kirschner & De Bruyckere, 2017; Margaryan et al., 2011; Prensky, 2001b). Moreover, demographic studies of Generation Y and Z show that their adoption of information and communication technology is, on average, higher compared to older cohorts. These digital natives take technology for granted (van der Smissen et al., 2013) and use advanced media more intensively, especially for personal empowerment, communication and entertainment (Hurrelmann & Albrecht, 2021, p. 61; Kennedy & Fox, 2013). In 2021, for example, German citizens aged 14–29 spent nearly 4.5 hours online per day on average, which is a factor of 3.5 vis-à-vis users aged 50–69 (ARD/ZDF-Forschungskommission, 2022). Young and Åkerström (2016) criticise the term digital native for its inaccuracy and rigidity because young individuals do not necessarily all have the same access to, competencies for and comfort with emerging technologies in a highly dynamic environment. Likewise, there is little support for the notion that older users, who have been referred to as digital immigrants with a lasting disadvantage in the digital world (Prensky, 2001a), cannot become acquainted with and master new technologies equally well. Consequently, the term digital natural focuses more on access to, knowledge of, literacy with and competencies for digital technologies, which are not strictly a function of chronological age (Young & Åkerström, 2016, p. 8). The unifying characteristic across both terms, however, is that certain individuals are well acquainted with digital technologies and understand them as an integral part of their daily lives (Bradbury, 2018; Hurrelmann & Albrecht, 2021, p. 59).

Despite various shortcomings such as inconsistent definitions (Parry & Urwin, 2011), neglected age as well as period effects in cross-sectional research designs (Schröder, 2018) and overly generalised results that belie the multifaceted characters that exist in reality within generational cohorts or collective terms such as digital natives, the broad array of existing studies that investigate the personality traits, values and beliefs of persons born after the year 1980, i.e. Generation Y (millennials) and Generation Z, sketch a rather clear picture. At the same time, they point to some interesting inherent inconsistencies and even conflicting characteristics. Digital natives have a strong sense of morality and are idealistic and optimistic (Schroth, 2019; Stapinski, 1999), but yet tend to be goal- and achievement-oriented (Kapner & Cybulski, 1997; Yeaton, 2008). They expect their ideas and

opinions to be heard and valued; at the same time, work-life balance ranks high on their personal agenda (Hurrelmann & Albrecht, 2021, p. 116; Merriman & Valerio, 2016). Elevated levels of narcissism and difficulty with criticism (Twenge & Campbell, 2008) are accompanied by materialism and strong self-monitoring (Loroz & Helgeson, 2013). Although generational members tend to be anxious and pessimistic about meritocracy and exhibit a stronger external locus of control compared to previous generations (Baralt et al., 2020; Twenge & Campbell, 2008), digital natives have a strong sense of independence and autonomy, as evidenced by assertiveness, self-reliance, expressiveness (i.e., emotional and intellectual) and curiousness (Napoli & Ewing, 2001). This may be driven by comparably high educational levels (Fry & Parker, 2018). Although not necessarily leading to lower levels of implicit biases (Allen & Harris, 2018), individuals born in the 1980s and later are racially and ethnically increasingly diverse (Pichler et al., 2021) and sensitive to equal opportunities and non-discrimination (Schroth, 2019).

When acknowledging signalling as a common as well as effective activity in recruitment processes and characterising digital natives as educated, expressive, somewhat narcissistic and achievement-oriented, it is reasonable to assume that candidates are well aware of the importance of signalling their personal qualities to reach their goals in competitive situations such as job interviews. They are likely to do this well in face-to-face settings, but due to their extensive experiences and acquaintance with advanced communication technologies, they are also proficient in signalling in digital environments (Hurrelmann & Albrecht, 2021, p. 59).

Over the past two decades, technological advancements in videoconference technology have almost eliminated delays in signal transmission and lack of synchronisation between audio and video channels, as frequently discussed in early studies on different modes of job interviews (cf. Straus et al., 2001). The media bandwidth of VC interviews, measuring the number of cues and signals that a medium conveys (Kraut et al., 1992), however, still remains lower compared to F2F settings. Clearly, digital communication channels allow for manifold signalling activities, but due to comparably small visible frames in videoconferences, absent social interaction prior to and after the interview and weakened or missing interviewer feedback, to which the interviewee behaviour needs to be adjusted, especially non-verbal impression management but also verbal and para-verbal IM tactics remain somewhat confined (Basch et al., 2020; Fullwood & Finn, 2010; Toldi, 2011). Vis-à-vis F2F interviews, the opportunities for intentionally sending manipulative signals are fewer in VC contexts. Hence, when comparing the two interview modes and observing the empirical findings that clearly point to the superiority of in-person settings for establishing social presence and employing IM (Basch et al., 2020), it is reasonable to expect that digital natives favour and accept F2F more because the mode simply offers incremental opportunities to tweak the impressions recruiters form of them and serves their interests.

In addition, on-site interviews may also be preferred because they enable candidates to get a first-hand picture of the employer. It has been argued that in job interviews, applicants receive important pieces of information not only about the vacancy but also about the work environment, helping them in their decision for or against an organisation (Farago et al., 2013; Wilhelmy et al., 2017). Although recruiters could use videoconferences to give candidates some insights, physically being on the premises of an organisation gives recruiters many superior opportunities to signal the potential employer's qualities to attract applicants (Dipboye & Johnson, 2013; Wilhelmy et al., 2016). Examples of how interviewers influence applicant impressions during on-site interviews include but may not be limited to deliberately choosing the interview building, handing out printed information materials and gifts, offering drinks, incorporating future colleagues, and arranging site visits (Wilhelmy et al., 2016, p. 321). Thus, candidates observing such artefacts, with many of them being hidden, less credible or remaining somewhat vague in VC interviews, can form a more authentic first impression of the work environment and organisational culture in F2F interviews. Because of these added benefits, digital natives are likely to accept F2F interviews more than VC interviews. Accordingly, the third hypothesis suggests:

H3:   *Digital natives accept the F2F mode in job interviews more than VC-mediated interviews.*

Given the importance of signalling and the effectiveness of impression management tactics in employment interviews, it is reasonable to conjecture that digital natives assume rivalling interviewees, regardless of generational affiliation, to do just the same. Moreover, individuals must expect that other candidates are better able to leverage F2F interviews in their favour by exploiting the additional opportunities for active impression management that these in-person settings provide, such as purposeful body language, enhanced eye contact, choice of attire and fragrance, certain topics of small talk conversations and deliberate behaviour during informal interactions before and after the interview (e.g. during office tours, waiting periods, coffee breaks, etc.). Bauerlein (2008) posits that digital natives' relational lives in the physical world tend to be impoverished due to excessive online interaction within a filtered and, hence, homogenous peer group, causing alienation with old traditions, cultural traits, customs and behavioural patterns. Therefore, the interaction in professional F2F interview situations in which career advancements are at stake must be an unaccustomed and uncomfortable experience that is less secure, thus inducing higher stress levels. Anxiety about disadvantages resulting from social misconduct, lacking etiquette, or simply nervousness may cause digital natives to perceive F2F interviews as less controllable and, hence, more prone to unfair judgements and outcomes. This holds especially true if digital natives expect to compete with older applicants, whose socialisation includes more training

for F2F interaction and who can simply draw on more extensive experiences in interpersonal relationships in an offline world.

Consequently, the additional opportunities for IM that in-person settings provide, combined with the expectation that some rivalling candidates may be superior in exploiting them, are likely to make F2F interviews appear as unequal 'playing fields' to digital natives. Hence, this interview mode may conflict with the generational cohort's idealistic sense of morality (Stapinski, 1999), be opposed to equal opportunities, and violate their appreciation for social as well as procedural justice (Schroth, 2019). Guided by highly subjective feelings of fairness (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018), digital natives who are unwilling due to moral beliefs or who are simply not capable of exploiting the entire room for manoeuvre that on-site interviews provide may disapprove of a selection procedure that may be manipulated (i.e. more than other procedures) by interviewees. When anticipating that clever signalling in on-site interviews can give certain applicants a competitive edge while penalising others, digital natives may find the resulting inequalities of F2F settings, or the mere risk thereof, as unfair. Conversely, VC interviews may be viewed as a rather level selection procedure in which digital natives are not disadvantaged. In fact, some individuals may even perceive virtual settings as advantageous. Overall, it can be expected that from the perspective of digital natives, fewer IM opportunities in VC interviews lead to less biased assessments and more equitable outcomes. These arguments motivate the last hypothesis:

H4:   *Digital natives perceive VC job interviews as fairer compared to F2F interviews.*

Data and Method

Novel primary data was gathered via an online survey (i.e. computer-assisted web interviewing) that was administered and distributed via LimeSurvey. The researchers posted invitations to participate in the study on LinkedIn and XING, which are the two leading professional social networks in Germany. These two platforms were selected because of their occupational/business focus, general fit to the survey's topic and hence superior effectiveness for recruiting motivated informants (vs. other social media) and the fact that the researchers could leverage their own personal networks. In addition, the link to the questionnaire and a brief introduction were included in an official newsletter mailing to the members of wiconnect, an alumni association of a German university. The survey was conducted online for five weeks in the fall of 2020, and a total of 515 questionnaires were completed. A follow-up mailing was not possible via the alumni association, but follow-up postings on the platforms used were done approximately after two weeks when the majority had reacted to the initial invitation, and daily responses approached zero (cf. Deutskens et al., 2004; Van Selm & Jankowski, 2006). Since multiple

follow-ups do not substantially increase response rates (Solomon, 2001), the survey was closed when the sample size remained stable for a few days in a row.

Individuals only qualified for the study if they had experienced at least one job interview and were born in the year 1981 or later to capture the generation of digital natives (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). In addition to a remark in the introduction of the survey, corresponding filter questions were used to exclude non-eligible participants. Interviewees were asked to answer questions with regard to their most recent F2F and/or VC interview situations. Those respondents who indicated having experience with both interview modes received two consecutive sets of questions (i.e., F2F first, followed by VC) to allow separate inquiries into the different formats. Consequently, the survey's design featured three different paths, depending on each subject's individual experience with employment interviews. Respondents who answered only regarding an F2F interview received 38 questions; the VC track consisted of 35 items. Due to some overlapping questions, respondents who had experience with F2F and VC interviews were confronted with a total of 56 questions. These included open- and closed-ended questions that were originally formulated in German. The questionnaires were structured in the following three broad sections: usage of digital information and communication technologies, employment interview experience (i.e. separate for F2F and VC) and demographic characteristics. A final question asked whether or not the survey had been completed in a serious manner, allowing for an ex-post exclusion of untrustworthy observations. Before launching the survey, the questionnaire was pre-tested with an academic and three respondents with qualifying characteristics (i.e. age and interview experience), one for each track. The data from the pre-tests was omitted for the analyses, but the feedback led to some wording adjustments to avoid ambiguous phrases and verified that interviewees were able to complete the survey within 15–20 minutes, which is considered an appropriate length (Revilla & Höhne, 2020).

Two participants were dropped from the analyses because of disqualifying responses to the control question at the end of the survey, raising doubts about the validity of the corresponding data. Hence, the final sample is based on the responses of 513 individuals, whereof some answered in regard to a F2F and VC interview, leading to a total of 744 observations of discrete employment interview situations.

Table 1 describes the survey participants in detail. The average age amounts to 26 years, with the youngest participant born in 2003. Women account for 68 per cent of the sample. Due to the location of the researchers, 95 per cent of respondents stated they lived in Germany, with the remainder indicating residencies in other countries. This ratio is similar to the 6 per cent of individuals (29 observations) who have been raised outside the country. A large overlap of these two characteristics (i.e. indicating the same individuals) is likely. Regarding the spatial distribution within Germany, the majority (56 per cent) was located in the Northwestern part of Germany, but the survey was able to reach participants from all 16 federal states.

These sample characteristics should be kept in mind when interpreting the results and transferring the insights to other national or cultural contexts.

Table 1. Selected Summary Statistics and Sample Split by Generation Y and Generation Z

Variable	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Full sample					
Year of birth	513	1993,89	4,20	1981	2003
Female	513	0,68	0,47	0	1
Job-seeking	513	0,02	0,14	0	1
Employed	513	0,40	0,49	0	1
Foreign	513	0,05	0,22	0	1
Resident city > 500,000	513	0,23	0,42	0	1
Web usage > 5 h/day	513	0,44	0,50	0	1
Generation Y (1981-1996)					
Year of birth	382	1992,33	3,65	1981	1996
Female	382	0,64	0,48	0	1
Job-seeking	382	0,03	0,16	0	1
Employed	382	0,51	0,50	0	1
Foreign	382	0,05	0,23	0	1
Resident city > 500,000	382	0,27	0,44	0	1
Web usage > 5 h/day	382	0,46	0,50	0	1
Generation Z (1997-2003)					
Year of birth	131	1998,44	1,53	1997	2003
Female	131	0,79	0,41	0	1
Job-seeking	131	0,00	0,00	0	0
Employed	131	0,11	0,31	0	1
Foreign	131	0,03	0,17	0	1
Resident city > 500,000	131	0,13	0,34	0	1
Web usage > 5 h/day	131	0,39	0,49	0	1

Ordered logistic regression models were estimated with measures for the acceptance and perceived fairness of the interview experiences as dependent variables. The former is based on one question in the survey asking specifically for the participants' subjective level of acceptance of the respective interview type as a selection method, using a seven-point Likert scale. The original item from the questionnaire translates as follows: "I regard the interview as an acceptable screening method in the application process." The fairness variable is constructed following Gilliland's (1993) model of applicant reactions: Three different seven-point items from the selection procedural justice scale (Bauer et al., 2001) were included in the questionnaire, drawing on Warsza's (2012) German translations. The mean value of the responses

to the three items is calculated for each observation, ultimately informing the fairness variable.

The first independent variable of interest that distinguishes between the two interview modes is a binary variable indicating whether or not the interview was F2F. The opposing dummy that is set to unity for a VC interview, zero otherwise, is the omitted category. Two additional explanatory variables capture the perceived social presence in the interviews and the possibility of employing IM tactics. For the former, participants were asked to indicate their consent to the following two statements that were adapted from Kreijns et al. (2018), both on seven-point Likert scales: First, "in the interview, I was able to build a relationship with the conversational partner(s)." Second, "in the interview, I felt close to the conversational partner(s)." The mean values of the two responses yield the final measure for the social presence regressor. The same approach is used to create the impression management variable, albeit with three underlying items that are adopted from Kristof-Brown et al. (2002) and that have been used in other studies to capture IM tactics (Tsai et al., 2005). First, "in the interview, I was able to present my skills and competencies in a positive way." Second, "in the interview, I was able to use gestures and facial expressions, such as smiling or nodding." Third, „in the interview, I was able to maintain constant eye contact with the conversational partner(s)."

A range of covariates controls for 'external' factors relating to the specific interview situations, including the number of interviewers present, the duration of the interview, whether the procedure is related to internal labour markets and the job level of the vacant position. Further, twelve independent variables capture innate applicant characteristics. These include the number of employment interviews a person had completed in total as a measure of general interview experience, the time lag since the last interview (i.e., the focus interview), the time spent online as a proxy for affinity to advanced communication technologies, age, gender, highest educational degree, occupational status, foreign place of residence and a dummy set to unity if a person lived in a city with more than 500,000 inhabitants. Pairwise correlation coefficients of all independent variables are unobtrusive and do not give reason to suspect problems related to multicollinearity.

Empirical Findings

To investigate digital native applicants' reactions to their own signalling activities in employment interviews (H1-H2) and whether perceptional differences exist between the two interview modes (H3-H4), the first two models in Table 2 treat every interview situation as a discrete event. This explains why the number of observations exceeds the number of completed questionnaires. Consequently, the sample combines both interview modes and allows us to distinguish between them by including the independent dummy variable 'Face-to-face interview' in the two models.

Table 2. Determinants of Interview Acceptance and Fairness

Variable	DV: Acceptance	DV: Fairness
Face-to-face interview	0,46 (,18)***	-0,51 (,17)***
Social presence	0,48 (,06)***	0,50 (,06)***
Impression management	0,49 (,09)***	0,66 (,09)***
Interview experience	-0,01 (,00)**	0,00 (,01)
Lag last interview	-0,01 (,05)	-0,06 (,05)
Interviewers	0,12 (,07)*	0,14 (,07)**
Duration	0,00 (,00)	0,00 (,00)
Internal	-0,30 (,22)	-0,11 (,20)
Manager position	0,50 (,53)	0,05 (,49)
Expert position	-0,51 (,39)	-0,09 (,38)
Staff position	-0,01 (,21)	0,20 (,20)
Internet usage	-0,02 (,14)	-0,13 (,13)
Age	0,01 (,02)	0,03 (,02)
Female	0,11 (,15)	0,10 (,14)
Bachelor	-0,01 (,17)	0,12 (,16)
Master	-0,16 (,24)	0,44 (,23)*
Doctor of Philosophy	-0,27 (,79)	0,91 (,82)
Job-seeking	0,36 (,48)	-0,50 (,46)
Employed	0,14 (,19)	-0,07 (,17)
Foreign	-0,52 (,31)*	-0,19 (,29)
Large city	0,32 (,17)*	0,12 (,16)
No. of Obs.	744	744
Pseudo R-squared	0,1189	0,0713

Note. The table contains coefficients; figures in parenthesis are standard errors.
* p <,10
** p <,05
*** p <,01

The statistically highly significant effects of social presence and opportunities to employ IM tactics are consistent in the two models in Table 2, thus supporting the expected relationships from H1 and H2. The coefficients of the two variables suggest strong positive effects on both dependent variables. These results show that employment interviews are accepted more as a method of personnel selection (i.e. independent of mode of realisation) and are perceived as fairer when candidates feel connected with the interviewers and can convey signals that underline their qualities. The statistically significant positive coefficient of the variable Face-to-face interview in the first column shows that F2F are more accepted among digital natives compared to VC interviews, lending strong support for H3. The perceived

fairness, on the other hand, is significantly lower in F2F settings, as evidenced by the negative coefficient of the same variable in the second column. We interpret this result as strong evidence in line with H4. Concerning the included control variables, only a few effects are noteworthy. The negative coefficient of the variable measuring the cumulative experience with employment interviews indicates that the more applicants have been in recruiting situations, the lower the acceptance of subsequent interviews, an effect that does not exist with regard to the perceived fairness, as suggested by the insignificant result of this variable in the second model. Candidates tend to accumulate interview experience mainly for two reasons: Either they find it difficult to get hired or switch jobs frequently. Against the background of such experiences, individuals may generally accept employment interviews less as a selection procedure. Finally, the number of company representatives (i.e. recruiters) present in job interviews is positively related to acceptance and fairness. When splitting the sample by year of birth to capture Generation Y and Generation Z members separately and re-running the same estimations, nearly identical results emerge in both generational cohorts, underlining the robustness of the models. Interestingly, the negative effect of F2F interviews on fairness perceptions, both in terms of coefficient size and significance level, is more pronounced in the younger Generation Z. The only divergent result in the robustness checks is an insignificant coefficient of the F2F variable in the acceptance model, again for Generation Z, suggesting that the youngest applicants do not accept one form of interview more than the other.

The analyses shown in Table 3 aim to identify the specific determinants of applicants' acceptance and perceived fairness for the two interview types, thereby outlining similarities and differences. For that purpose, the sample is split by interview mode.

The positive effects of social presence and IM remain in all models. The statistically highly significant coefficients provide further evidence in line with H1 and H2. Interestingly, the number of interviewers is only statistically significant for VC interviews, indicating that the commitment that a company shows in video-mediated recruitment situations is capable of increasing both the acceptance and the perceived fairness. The corresponding coefficients in the models investigating F2F remain insignificant. The results for the control variable Internal merit further explanation. When comparing the coefficients across the four models, it appears as if the VC mode is particularly suited for conducting interviews with internal candidates who are already employed by a company: Internal applicants, compared to external ones, accept F2F less and perceive VC as fairer. Such candidates do not necessarily need personal connections and firsthand impressions of F2F interviews because they tend to be familiar with the company and potentially also with their conversational partners. Internal candidates might consider VC interviews as a fairer selection method (i.e. versus external candidates) because, in internal hiring situations, in-house performance appraisals and personnel records should be

available, which are rather objective factors in the decision-making process. Since tactical impression management is somewhat limited in VC interviews, such virtual settings offer fewer opportunities to influence decision-makers' judgements and, thus, might be perceived as fairer by internal candidates.

Table 3. Determinants of Applicant Reactions by Interview Mode

	Acceptance		Fairness	
Variable	DV: Acceptance F2F	DV: Acceptance Video	DV: Fairness F2F	DV: Fairness Video
Social presence	0,94 (,16)***	1,19 (,20)***	0,68 (,14)***	0,78 (,18)***
Impression management	0,50 (,13)***	0,44 (,14)***	0,76 (,13)***	0,70 (,13)***
Same mode interview experience	0,00 (,01)	-0,01 (,01)*	0,02 (,01)*	-0,01 (,01)
Lag last interview	0,04 (,06)	-0,07 (,09)	-0,05 (,06)	-0,07 (,08)
Interviewers	0,12 (,09)	0,25 (,15)*	0,07 (,08)	0,46 (,14)***
Duration	0,00 (,00)	0,00 (,01)	0,00 (,00)	0,00 (,01)
Internal	-0,50 (,25)**	0,89 (,56)	-0,27 (,23)	0,89 (,45)**
Manager position	0,44 (,68)	0,70 (,88)	-0,18 (,57)	0,12 (,89)
Expert position	-0,69 (,47)	-0,45 (,76)	-0,40 (,44)	0,19 (,68)
Staff position	0,27 (,25)	-0,50 (,40)	0,32 (,24)	-0,30 (,38)
Internet usage	0,21 (,18)	-0,51 (,26)**	-0,15 (,16)	-0,14 (,24)
Age	0,02 (,03)	0,02 (,04)	0,03 (,03)	0,05 (,04)
Female	-0,04 (,19)	0,00 (,27)	-0,03 (,17)	0,05 (,26)
Bachelor	0,10 (,21)	0,04 (,32)	0,11 (,19)	0,25 (,30)
Master	0,12 (,31)	-0,21 (,45)	0,65 (,29)**	0,19 (,40)
Doctor of Philosophy	0,11 (,95)	-1,74 (1,44)	1,63 (,96)*	-1,54 (1,23)
Job-seeking	0,18 (,61)	0,88 (,84)	-0,71 (,57)	0,31 (,78)
Employed	-0,08 (,23)	0,77 (,37)**	-0,07 (,21)	0,17 (,34)
Foreign	-1,05 (,39)***	0,30 (,55)	-0,09 (,39)	-0,14 (,47)
Large city	0,29 (,22)	0,61 (,30)**	-0,05 (,19)	0,57 (,28)**
No. of Obs.	502	230	502	230
Pseudo R-squared	0,085	0,1708	0,0479	0,1049

Note. The table contains coefficients; figures in parenthesis are standard errors.
* p <,10
** p <,05
*** p <,01

Concerning the remaining control variables, the results are as one would expect. Already employed individuals exhibit a higher acceptance of VC interviews, which can be explained by the higher flexibility and, hence, better practicability from their perspective. The same argument seems to hold for foreign candidates, as the highly significant negative coefficient in the model with F2F acceptance as the dependent variable suggests. Finally, applicants who live in larger cities, compared to individuals from rural areas, react more favourably to VC interviews, both in terms of acceptance and perceived fairness. A higher penetration and rate of adoption of advanced technologies in urban spaces and, thus, more experience with innovative communication media can explain this finding.

Discussion of the Results

Implications for Research and Theory

The empirical results at hand partly confirm but also partly challenge the existing literature, which clearly suggests more favourable reactions to and a preference for F2F interviews (Straus et al., 2001; Blacksmith et al., 2016; Basch et al., 2020). In line with previous studies, German digital natives accept F2F interviews as selection procedures in recruitment processes more than VC interviews. Although this result is well-documented for previous generations (Blacksmith et al., 2016), it is important to note that Generation Y and Generation Z applicants continue to appreciate the benefits of in-person interviews: On the one hand, due to the mode's superiority for one's own signalling activities, and on the other, for obtaining a first-hand impression of the hiring organisation and the opportunity to immerse in the on-site atmosphere at the potential employer. The additional result, that the fundamental ability to employ IM tactics as an intense form of signalling increases the perceived level of fairness in both interview modes (i.e., when analysed separately), also confirms the extant literature. In combination, these pieces of evidence answer RQ1: Signaling activities impact the acceptance and perceived fairness of job interviews. That digital native applicants perceive F2F (vs. VC) interviews as less fair, however, is a novel finding. The generational cohort seems to be concerned about factors in in-person recruitment situations that may not be leveraged by individuals to the same degree. Some digital natives may be better able to employ IM tactics in F2F interviews than others, for example, via a deliberate demeanour, posture, social graces, aura or olfaction, thereby manipulating recruiters' decisions in their favour, leading to an inferior fairness perception of the F2F mode. This becomes evident when the two interview types are compared directly. A presumed alternative explanation for these fairness concerns could be that younger generations of employees, given their general sensitivity to inequalities, are more aware of the fact that interviewers are susceptible to biases and that VC settings mitigate the resulting unfairness. For example, when fewer non-verbal cues exist, prescribed gender stereotypes can manifest themselves less. Moreover, the reciprocal sympathy or antipathy that arises naturally in presence simply remains more diffuse in video-mediated settings. Consequently, VC interviews are perceived as fairer by digital natives because recruitment outcomes are potentially less influenced by personal interactions and human affection.

In accordance with the theoretical predictions of signalling theory, digital natives seem to understand the benefits of signalling well and indeed employ IM tactics in job interviews – regardless of mode – to reach their goals. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that the generational cohort has an ambivalent attitude towards signalling: While it is employed to help them reach their own goals, it is perceived as unfair when others do so or when others could potentially do so in a more effective way. This insight corresponds with previous studies that have suggested that the

moral considerations of some candidates (i.e., those individuals with particularly high ethical standards) may lead to rejecting active signalling despite knowing about its potential influence (Singh et al., 2002). Hence, the empirical results here point to a dilemma when moral considerations may distort the signalling game in employment interviews. This interesting phenomenon surfaces only in a generational cohort that believes firmly in equal opportunities and in a technological context that facilitates multiple modes for administering employment interviews. The ambivalent perception among younger candidates and the resulting paradoxical behaviour merit further theoretical investigation and understanding, especially to guide research aiming at producing practical advice for hiring organisations. So far, the literature stream on signalling theory has focused predominantly on the bilateral relationship between the party who signals and the party who screens to reduce information asymmetries. From an economic perspective, the related costs and benefits have been of central interest. When framing the fairness concerns as costs that may lead to frustration among candidates and potentially to anomalous behaviour in certain hiring situations, the results of the study at hand may point to externalities of signalling activities, at least in some specific contexts, that have been neglected in most studies so far.

Managerial Implications

The findings of the analyses by interview mode address RQ2 and offer actionable implications for HR managers to increase applicant reactions in terms of acceptance and perceived fairness. First, the results underline the importance of creating a warm and respectful atmosphere in which recruiters and applicants can interact and build relationships in an unhesitant manner. Such an approach is equally important in both interview modes and will positively impact applicant reactions as it makes for an environment in which applicants feel comfortable and can present themselves openly.

Second, when recruiters decide on an interview mode in a specific hiring context, the level of a candidate's personal interviewing experience, especially with VC interviews, can be a valuable piece of information. Applicants with a long record of job interviews tend to lose faith in video-mediated ones and accept them less. While measuring an individual's precise interviewing history remains difficult, certain indicators in curricula vitae, such as long unemployment phases or multiple job switching, may be used as proxies. Offering such candidates an F2F interview is likely to increase acceptance and perceived fairness. In general, it is advisable to explain to all candidates the reasons and benefits that led to an organisation's decision to conduct a digital interview, as studies have attested explanations positive effects on applicants' reactions (Truxillo et al., 2009).

Third, organisations can further increase the acceptance and perceived fairness among applicants by increasing the number of corporate participants in VC inter-

views. A larger number of attendees, for example, HR managers or staff from the hiring department, signals serious interest and commitment in a situation when VC interviews may be interpreted as a second-best and, hence, somewhat 'half-hearted' selection procedure by many job seekers. Since an extensive jury may appear intimidating to some candidates, future research should clarify the optimal number of participants in selection procedures while accounting for different job levels.

Fourth, the results indicate that organisations can employ VC interviews as the method of choice for selection processes in internal labour markets. In these situations, information asymmetries are lower because both parties know each other and find it less necessary to signal underlying qualities. Consequently, companies and candidates can reap the benefits of lower costs and higher flexibility of VC interviews. Similar recommendations relate to external candidates who are employed, located abroad, or live in a larger city. Applicants with these characteristics tend to accept VC interviews more (or accept F2F less), and large city residents even perceive them as fairer.

Finally, since the results indicate that digital native candidates accept the F2F mode more but at the same time associate it with impaired fairness, companies should consider adding VC interviews in these recruitment situations, for example, by adopting multi-staged processes in which both types are combined. Such an approach is likely to impact applicant reactions in a positive way. When this is not possible, an informed decision regarding the preferred interview mode must be made against the background of balancing higher acceptance versus perceived fairness. HR managers could assess the characteristics of all invitees based on the submitted application documents (i.e. age, interview experience, internal vs. external, place of residence, etc.) and decide accordingly. Drawing on such innate candidate characteristics may be useful to determine a type of interview that is likely to cause (more) positive reactions. Nevertheless, changing the mode from applicant to applicant within one staffing event is not advisable due to impaired comparability. When organisations select F2F interviews as the preferred mode, recruiters should at least keep in mind that potentially Generation Y and Generation Z candidates might perceive them as less fair and find ways to attenuate such concerns. One approach could be to conduct interviews in a more structured way and explain to candidates how this increases equitableness in the selection process (Bill et al., 2023).

Conclusion

The paper sets out to investigate applicant reactions to the two prevailing forms of employment interviews: face-to-face and video-mediated interviews. Specifically, the study focuses on candidates belonging to the generational cohort of digital natives and analyses the subjective acceptance of an interview as a selection procedure and the perceived fairness of an interview. The theoretical framework of signalling

is applied to shed light on the effects of social presence and the adoption of impression management tactics. Although the underlying mechanisms of signalling, without surprise, remain valid, the study shows that the specific characteristics of Generation Y and Generation Z lead to somewhat unexpected reactions. In this vein, the empirical analyses at hand produce results that are partially in conflict with existing studies, especially regarding the finding that F2F interviews are perceived as less fair. Previous research suggests that F2F causes consistently positive reactions, both in terms of acceptance and fairness (cf. Straus et al., 2001; Blacksmith et al., 2016; Basch et al., 2020). The specific focus on digital natives and the circumstance that face-to-face interactions are "uncomfortable terrain" for younger applicants explain these discrepancies. In anticipation of competing candidates, who may exploit in-person situations via intense signalling, digital natives discount the procedural justice of F2F interviews.

When interpreting the results, however, it is important to point out that only relative differences are investigated, meaning that digital natives accept F2F more than VC interviews but perceive the former as less fair compared to the latter. The results do neither suggest that members of the generational cohort do not accept VC nor that they deem F2F employment interviews as an unfair method per se. In line with existing research, the positive effects of social presence as a general condition that facilitates signalling and the adoption of impression management tactics as an intense form thereof are confirmed, also for digital natives. Moreover, the nature of the German data produces insights that are country-specific because national culture is known to impact the values, beliefs and attitudes of individuals (Inglehart et al., 1998). Until further studies scrutinise the phenomenon in other national and/or cultural environments, the managerial recommendations developed above should be transferred to other contexts with care.

The following limitations remain. First, the sample used in the paper at hand lacks representativeness of the underlying German population of digital natives. The distribution of the survey via a university alumni association and business-related social networks is even likely to cause some sample selection and lead to biased data, probably in favour of white-collar employees. Second, the survey was designed to capture retrospective perceptions of past employment interviews. Although a control variable, which turned out to be consistently insignificant, captures the length of the period between the interview and the survey, accounting for potential memory effects and hindsight errors, the approach may be prone to biases. Third, the study directly compares F2F with VC interviews and treats them as separate events in discrete recruiting situations. In practice, however, staged selection procedures, including multiple interview modes, often with VC preceding F2F, have become more popular. Future research may want to observe such interdependencies and clarify if they impact the acceptance and perceived fairness, as conjectured above. Fourth, data collection coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, in which avoidance of social contact was strongly promoted and technology-mediated com-

munication, including VC employment interviews, heavily proliferated. Thus, a replication study could clarify if the exceptional pandemic circumstances have distorted the underlying data. Finally, the deliberate focus of the investigation was put on applicant reactions, leading to the fact that recruitment outcomes are neglected in the present study. Extending the analysis to illuminate the corresponding relationships and capture, for example, if recruitment processes and staffing decisions were value-adding (i.e., hired employees turn out to be high performers in their jobs), poses considerable challenges for data collection because longitudinal as well as sensitive data would be needed. Nevertheless, the results of such research could be valuable for HR practitioners as they are faced with increasing numbers of digital natives in recruitment processes.

Despite these limitations, the findings at hand suggest that the results of older studies are not universally transferable to applicants born in the 1980s and after and thus, need to be interpreted with caution due to some unique characteristics of digital natives. Furthermore, the study shows that the consideration of values and beliefs in signalling contexts is important as the former can influence individuals' behaviour/perceptions and cause anomalies in the signalling game.

Acknowledgement

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