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Student Awareness of the Use of Social Media Screening by Prospective Employers

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Hiring professionals are increasingly using social media sites as screening tools. The primary purpose of this study was to determine what students thought employers considered important information when researching profiles. A survey was given to students enrolled in College of Business classes at a university in the Southeast. Students were cognizant that employers consider posts about drugs, alcohol, sex, profanity, and negative comments. Students did not consider posts and photo tags by friends to be important to employers, nor did they consider grammar and spelling to be important. This is in stark contrast to what recent research indicates employers consider important.

Keywords: business education, employment screening, Facebook, social media in recruitment, social recruiting

Social media has revolutionized the world; the statistics are staggering. According to a recent study by Pew Research Center, 67% of online adults in the United States use social networking sites (Brenner, 2013). There are over 950 million Facebook users worldwide with 500 million people using Facebook daily for an average of 20 min per visit (Noyes, 2013). LinkedIn, the world's largest professional networking site, reached the 200 million global member milestone in early 2013 (LinkedIn, 2013). In the United States, 20% of online adult users indicate they use LinkedIn (Brenner, 2013). Other commonly used social networking sites include Twitter (16%), Pinterest (15%), Instagram (13%), and Tumblr (6%; Brenner, 2013).

With the enormity and growth of social media it is not surprising that businesses are also increasingly embracing social media to market and connect to their publics. More than 1 million websites are now in some capacity integrated with Facebook and 48% of Fortune Global 100 companies are now on Google Plus (Honigman, 2012). Companies are not only using social networks to market their companies and brands, but also are using social networks as a tool in their employee recruitment, screening, and selection processes. The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which university students think that prospective employers use social networks

to screen job applicants, their attitude toward this practice, and their perception of what content prospective employers might deem important when considering an applicant for a job position.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

Prevalence of Using Social Media to Screen Job Applicants

According to Riges Younan, social recruiting “harnesses the evolution of Web 2.0 technologies and social media tools to communicate, engage, inform, and recruit our future talent” (Jacobs, 2009). Jacobs modified Younan’s original definition and defined *social recruiting* as “delivering sound hiring decisions by actively using web-based technologies to build a shared understanding between employers/recruiters and passive and active job seekers” (p. 3). How prevalent is the usage of social media to screen potential applicants and what content positively or negatively influences the decision to further consider an applicant?

While the usage statistics vary, research indicates that some companies do use social networking sites to research job candidates. In a nationwide online study of 2,303 hiring managers and human resources (HR) professionals conducted by Harris Interactive, 37% of companies surveyed reported that they use social networking sites to research job candidates (CareerBuilder, 2012). An additional 11%

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reported that while they do not currently engage in such practices, they intend to in the future. Of those who indicated they do not currently use social media sites as a screening tool nor do they plan to, 15% indicated that their company policies prohibit the practice. According to McDonnell (2012), use of social media as a screening tool varies by industry. Information technology (52%) uses online sources the most while health care uses them the least. The particular site used also varies. Employers reported fairly equal use of Facebook (65%) and LinkedIn (63%) and much less use of Twitter (16%).

Other studies suggest a more widespread acceptance of social recruiting. A survey of 1,000 recruiting and human resource global professionals indicated a much more pervasive use of social media for recruiting (Jobvite, 2012). Ninety-two percent of the respondents used or planned to use social media. This incident rate was up nearly 10% from the 2010 survey.

In a study conducted by Cross-Tab for Microsoft, recruiters in France, Germany, United Kingdom, and the United States reported that they not only check online sources but they also reported that many of their companies had made online screening a formal requirement of the hiring process (Microsoft, 2010). Across all countries, HR professionals indicated that they believed that the use of online reputational information would increase over the subsequent five years (Microsoft, 2010).

Hiring managers gave the following as reasons why they used these sites: (a) to see if the candidate presents him- or herself professionally (65%), to see if the candidate is a good fit for the company culture (51%), to learn more about the candidate's qualifications (45%), to see if the candidate is well-rounded (35%), and to look for reasons not to hire the candidate (12%) (CareerBuilder, 2012). In the words of Rosemary Haefner, vice president of HR at CareerBuilder, "because social media is a dominant form of communication today, you can certainly learn a lot about a person by viewing their public, online personas" (CareerBuilder, 2012).

Influence of Online Reputation on Hiring Decisions

There is some evidence that a candidate's online reputation can strongly influence the decisions of recruiters and HR professionals. In one study, 70% of U.S. professionals reported that they had rejected candidates based on online information (Microsoft, 2010). Similarly, in a Reppler (2011) survey of 300 professionals, 91% of the hiring professionals reported they use these sites and 69% reported they had rejected a candidate due to social media content. On a positive note, 85% reported that a positive online reputation also influences their hiring decisions and 84% considered online reputation information to be among the top two factors to consider when comprehensively reviewing a candidate's information (Microsoft, 2010).

Other studies confirm that content found via social media can cause hiring managers to reject a candidate. That was case for 34% of the respondents who use social media as a screening tool in a recent study (CareerBuilder, 2012). Again, content can also work in a candidate's favor, as 29% of the managers in this same study indicated that they found something that caused them to hire a candidate (CareerBuilder, 2012).

Content that contributes negatively to a candidate's online reputation includes the obvious, such as drug and alcohol use (CareerBuilder, 2012; Jobvite, 2012; Reppler, 2011), provocative and inappropriate photos or information (CareerBuilder, 2012; Jobvite, 2012; Microsoft, 2010; Reppler, 2011), profanity (Jobvite, 2012), and content that causes concerns about the candidate's lifestyle (Microsoft, 2010). Additionally, content that can also work against a candidate includes negative comments about an employer or former employer (CareerBuilder, 2012; Microsoft, 2010; Reppler, 2011), negative and discriminatory comments about others (CareerBuilder, 2012; Reppler, 2011), inappropriate comments made by the candidate (Reppler, 2011), and sharing confidential information (Reppler, 2011).

Interestingly, for many professionals evidence of communication skills or lack thereof was important in considering a candidate (CareerBuilder, 2012; Jobvite, 2012; Microsoft, 2010; Reppler, 2011). In one study, grammar and spelling mistakes in social profiles prompted a stronger negative reaction than alcohol consumption (Jobvite, 2012).

Items that garnered positive reactions by hiring professionals include evidence that the recruiter has a good feel for the candidate's personality (CareerBuilder, 2012; Reppler, 2011), is professional (CareerBuilder, 2012), is well rounded (CareerBuilder, 2012; Reppler, 2011), is creative (CareerBuilder, 2012; Reppler, 2011), and volunteers and/or contributes to charities (Jobvite, 2012). In at least one study, political and religious posts were considered neutral items by reporting professionals (Jobvite, 2012).

Awareness and Attitudes Toward the Practice of Social Media Screening

Consumers, in general, had mixed opinions about the appropriateness of professionals examining their online content. They felt it was reasonable to search professional networking sites but less reasonable to scrutinize personal networking sites (Microsoft, 2010). Several studies have specifically targeted a student population. Peluchette and Karl (2008) found that students were very comfortable with family, friends, and classmates viewing their profiles but more neutral with respect to employers or strangers viewing their profile. Drinking or alcohol-related photos or posts were of greatest concern. In a related study, Peluchette and Karl (2010) found that students who thought that people other than their close friends were not likely to view their Facebook profile tended

to post content that projected an image that was fun and friendly, appealing, or wild.

In a more recent student-oriented study, nearly 51% of respondents indicated that they were not aware that the employers or recruiters could view their profiles yet quite a few respondents (45.3%) believed that employers and recruiters looked at job candidate profiles all of the time (Vicknair, Elkersh, Yancey, & Budden, 2010). In this study, not only were a good number of students aware of the practice of social media screening by hiring professionals, but also the majority of the respondents (69.4%) felt that employers and recruiters had the right to check their profiles. This particular study did not measure in depth particular types of content and what content students believe to be important or influential to recruiters or hiring professionals. The purpose of this study was to measure which types of content students perceive to be important to prospective employers and to determine if their perceptions were consistent with what research indicates hiring professionals search for and consider in the screening process.

METHOD

The majority of the research reviewed in the background literature was conducted and reported by industry sources. Rarely did these sources provide a detailed description of their methodology or survey instrument. The analysis consisted of reporting what percentage of hiring professionals were using social media and what percentage of hiring professionals considered particular content. Consistency in the results across various sources suggest the data reported in the literature are reliable and valid.

The content reported in the literature served as a starting point for the development of the survey instrument used in this study. Based on all the reported studies, 18 types of social media content were identified. These include the following: pictures with drugs in them, drug related posts, racial comments, sexually inappropriate pictures, negative comments about past/present employers, use of profanity, alcohol-related posts, sexually related posts, negative comments about people, pictures with alcohol in them, the groups the applicant belonged to, photo tags by friends, where an applicant checks in, grammar and spelling errors, shared materials, excessive use of texting language, posts made by applicant's friends, and games played on Facebook.

Rather than simply asking students if they thought hiring professionals were considering these items in evaluating an applicant using a dichotomous (yes or no) question, students were asked to indicate on a 5-point Likert-type scale how important the items were to prospective employers, with responses ranging from 1 (*very unimportant*) to 5 (*very important*). The survey also measured if the candidate had a Facebook profile and their privacy settings, felt employers would search for a job applicant on various social

networking sites including the most commonly used sites mentioned in the literature (measured on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 [*unlikely*] to 4 [*likely*]), and had attitudes toward a prospective employer reviewing their online presence (6 items measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 [*strongly disagree*] to 5 [*strongly agree*]).

A group self administered survey was given to students enrolled in College of Business classes at a regional university located in the Southeast. Of the 433 students who participated in the survey, the majority of the students were seniors (53.8%) followed by juniors (28.9%). Nearly 70% were between the ages of 20 and 24 years of age. There were slightly more women (52.6%) than men (47.4%), which is in line with the gender composition of most universities. Eighty-seven percent were majors in the College of Business. Slightly less than half (42.5%) indicated that they were looking for a career position. Of those not looking, 24.2% indicated there was a 0% chance of looking for a position within the next six months, 22.3% indicated that there was a 100% chance of looking for a position in the next six months and the mean response to this question was 51.60% ($SD = 39.401\%$).

RESULTS

Ninety-three percent of the students indicated that they had a Facebook profile with 56.7% setting their privacy settings to friends only, 26.5% customizing their privacy settings, 9.9% leaving it public, and 6.9% not knowing what their privacy setting was. Nearly 80% of the respondents felt that prospective employers were either likely or very likely to check Facebook for applicants' profiles. The average response for Facebook on this 4-point scale was 3.150 ($SD = 0.976$). Other sites in order of their mean ranking included Google ($M = 2.900$; $SD = 0.937$), LinkedIn ($M = 2.580$; $SD = 1.028$), Twitter ($M = 2.540$; $SD = 1.006$), Yahoo ($M = 2.350$; $SD = 0.899$), Photoshare ($M = 2.280$; $SD = 1.024$), Myspace ($M = 2.200$; $SD = 1.003$), Craigslist ($M = 2.110$; $SD = 0.972$), and other ($M = 2.050$; $SD = 1.087$).

Students were asked six attitudinal questions about the possibility of employers reviewing their posts online. The items were measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The items are ranked in Table 1 by their mean values. The statement that elicited the strongest agreement and the most consistent response was that they don't post things they do not want an employer to see. Students in general, although less consistently, also agreed that they have removed things from the Internet they did not want an employer to see. They tended to disagree with the statements that it is wrong for anyone to consider what they have posted on the Internet when applying for a job and that they would worry about cleaning up what is on the Internet when starting to look for a job. Again, both of these items showed a good bit of variation. The two

TABLE 1
Mean Ranking for Attitudes Toward Social Media
Screening Items

Item	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
I just don't post things that I would not want an employer to see.	432	3.980	1.045
I have removed things that I did not want an employer to see.	431	3.260	1.258
I am concerned about what a prospective employer might see about me.	432	3.040	1.434
It is none of anyone's business what I post.	431	2.680	1.237
I will worry about cleaning up what is on the Internet about me when I start looking for a job.	432	2.620	1.262
I think it is wrong for anyone to consider what I have posted on the Internet when I apply for a job.	431	2.590	1.143

statements that showed the greatest variation in responses were that they were concerned about what a prospective employer might see and that it is none of anyone's business what they post.

Students were then asked to indicate how important they thought 18 items were to a prospective employer when deciding whether to consider an applicant for a job position. Importance was measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*very unimportant*) to 5 (*very important*). Principal components factor analysis was employed as a method of reducing the number of items down and to demonstrate the underlying structure of the social media content items. First, the 18 items were factor analyzed and two factors emerged. An orthogonal (varimax) rotation was then performed to assist in the interpretation of the factors. All items loaded highly (in the .53–.87 range). A oblique rotation produced the same factors with even higher factor loadings. Two items (alcohol pictures and negativity) were eliminated because they loaded equally on both factors. The first factor accounted for 31.99% of the variance and the second factor accounted for 28.74% of the variance. Thus, 60.73% percentage of the variance was accounted for by the solution. Table 2 contains the remaining 16 items and their loadings on the varimax rotated solution.

The items loading highly on each factor were then summed to create two subscales. The first factor contained eight items that had to do with such as things as sex, drugs, alcohol, racism, profanity, and negative comments about past and present employers. The reliability coefficient for these eight items was high (Cronbach's $\alpha = .915$). The second factor contained eight items that had to do with either friends and group interactions or written communication. The reliability coefficient for these eight items, while not as high as for Factor 1, nevertheless exceeded the generally accepted threshold of .70 (Cronbach's $\alpha = .876$). A review of how the items grouped together in the factor analysis also supports good content validity.

TABLE 2
Rotated Component Matrix From Responses to the
Question "How Important Do You Think the Following
Items Are to a Prospective Employer When Deciding
Whether to Consider an Applicant for a Job Position?"

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2
Sexual inappropriate pictures	.877	.136
Racial comments	.856	.145
Pictures with drugs in them	.809	.028
Drug related posts	.805	.088
Negative comments about past or present employers	.749	.367
Use of profanity	.677	.388
Alcohol-related posts	.647	.373
Sexual related posts	.612	.439
Shared materials	.182	.805
Excessive use of texting language	.142	.759
Posts made by applicant's friends	.257	.743
Photo tags by friends	.303	.709
Grammar and spelling errors	.160	.704
Where an applicant checks in	.295	.675
The groups an applicant belongs to	.418	.601
Games played on Facebook	-.051	.586

The mean for the summed variable based on factor 1 items was 34.16 ($SD = 6.10$). The mean for the summed variable based on factor 2 items was 25.21 ($SD = 6.54$). A paired *t* test was conducted to determine if the mean ratings of perceived importance were significantly different for factors 1 and 2. There was a significant difference in scores for factors 1 and 2, $t(410) = 30.61$, $p = .000$.

DISCUSSION

Perhaps the most interesting finding is the discrepancy between students' perceptions of the importance of grammar, spelling, and in general good communication skills and employers' perception of these things. As previously discussed, in one study grammatical and spelling errors elicited even more negative reactions from hiring professionals than alcohol related content (Jobvite, 2012). Students may not be aware or at least fully appreciate that good written communication skills should be applied beyond academic term papers. Employers repeatedly complain that college graduates lack in the area of communication skills (Fischer, 2013; Middleton, 2011). "Employers say that recent graduates often don't know how to communicate effectively, and struggle with adapting, problem-solving, and making decisions" (Fischer, 2013).

Students are also less aware of the fact that many hiring professionals consider which groups students belong to and what others post to their profiles to be important reflections of a candidate. In fact, students considered "photo tags by friends" and "posts by the applicant's friends" to be relatively

unimportant. It may be that students in this sample have not had friends make inappropriate comments or photo tags or if they did they deleted such content. Or perhaps, as students did not make these posts, they do not consider them to be an extension of who they are. This was not addressed in this study but would be worthy of additional research.

However, students seem to have a good appreciation for the fact that many prospective employers may research their profiles when they apply for a job. They appear to take precautionary measures such as customizing their Facebook privacy settings or setting their profile to Friends only. Additionally, many agreed that they do not post content that they would not want an employer to see or if they were concerned that they had later removed content.

There seems to be a general awareness on the part of students that prospective employers would consider posts dealing with negative comments, drugs, alcohol, sex, and profanity to be important information about a potential job candidate. These were all the items that accounted for factor 1. Individually and collectively, students rated these types of social media to be important to prospective employers.

Implications for Business Educators

These results certainly have implications for business educators and university career placement centers. The consequences of posting problematic information should be addressed early in a student's academic career. For that matter, these issues should really be raised in K–12 contexts. At the very least, discussions on what is appropriate content for social media should be incorporated into college orientation programs and lower level classes. Classes dealing specifically with written communication skills should incorporate social media assignments which may include writing posts as well as critiquing posts of others from the perspective of a potential employer. Business communication classes should stress the importance of good communication skills across all forms of communication including email messages and social media posts. Additional research should address in greater depth the issues of discrepancy identified in this study; particularly, student attitudes about what others post and the importance of grammatical errors and the use of texting language. As texting language was not considered at all important to students, it would be interesting to address this issue in greater depth with employers.

Future Research

Prior research from employers has simply measured if hiring professionals use social media sites and what they consider important. The reported results have been in the form of per-

centages based on simple tabulations rather than statistics. The studies have not measured the degree to which hiring professionals find various content important in their evaluation of job applicants. An extension of this research would be to take the two-factor scale developed in this study and administer it to both students and hiring professionals. This would enable the researchers to make a more direct comparison of the alignment of employer and student perceptions.

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