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# College Students Use Social Networking Sites for Sharing with Friends, But Guess Who Else Is Looking?

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**Abstract** - Jobvite, a recruiting platform for the social web, reports from their annual 2012 survey of recruiters that 92% of U.S. companies are using social networking sites (SNS) for hiring purposes (Jobvit, 2012). Career Builder reported in 2009 that 45% of employers were using SNS to screen and research applicants (CareerBuilder, 2009). It is important that faculty and support staff working to place students, and the students themselves, understand the developments and practices in the use of social networking sites for job search and recruiting and the best methods, as well as detriments when marketing themselves. This study examines corporate recruiters', operating on a college campus, behaviors and attitudes toward the use of social media in recruiting.

**Keywords** – Social networking sites, College students, Recruiters, Job Search

**Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and/or Practitioners** – Twenty-seven percent of the recruiters surveyed for this study report using social media sites to screen and evaluate applicants. Various content types were rated as either positive or negative. Students and those on the job market need to be aware

of the growing use of social media in hiring decisions and implications of social media content on those decisions by recruiters.

## Literature Review

Using social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn is becoming more popular, with both job seekers and employers. This research seeks to understand recruiters' evaluation and behavior with regards to utilizing SNS for hiring decisions. As Strehlke (2010) points out, the use of SNS can improve the visibility of job seekers, but not without its challenges. The conclusion, after a review of the available literature, is for attention to privacy and work/personal life issues, online presentation, managing online information and networking practices, as well as potential legal challenges, especially when SNS use uncovers areas of the applicant that are not relevant to the job (Black and Johnson, 2012).

While the reported percentages seem to show an increasing use of SNS for hiring purposes, research in the area is lacking as suggested by Brown and Vaughn (2011), Davison, Maraist and Bing (2011) and Black and Johnson (2012). Very little empirical research exists in the areas of utilizing SNS for either the recruiting or screening processes. One potential benefit of using SNS for hiring procedures involves corroboration of applicant provided information from other sources, such as the application or resume. The cost to uncover potentially valuable information is very low relative to other methods of obtaining the same information. Recruiters using SNS are able to get a feel for the candidates' "fit" with the organizations, as well as to evaluate their communication skills and creativity. They can also use the SNS information as supporting evidence of qualifications listed in other hiring materials, i.e. resume or application (Jones and Behling, 2010). Potential risks have also been discussed. Invasion of privacy, whether perceived or actual, is a potential risk. The information obtained through the SNS search could suffer from a lack of job relevance. The information from SNS is also, often, evaluated without complete, or any, contextual background. Discrimination, blatant or otherwise may also occur (Brown and Vaughn, 2011). Black and Johnson (2012) propose that, with the use of SNS, discrimination would exist for a variety of reasons including the underrepresentation of minorities on job sites, a more favorable perception of applicants with a social media site than those without, and also a more favorable perception of men and younger applicants.

A few studies have examined the use of SNS by either recruiters or job seekers. One study (Nikolaou, 2014) examined the use of Facebook, LinkedIn and job boards by both job seekers and human resource professionals. In general, findings indicate that younger job seekers and human resource professionals tend towards Facebook and job boards, while the older in both groups utilize LinkedIn. A higher education level is associated more with LinkedIn for the job seeker. Males also tended to use LinkedIn more than females for both the job seeker and human resources professionals groups. Job boards were still seen as an effective tool for job seekers.

Only a handful of studies have investigated the impact of SNS postings and recruitment evaluations. When respondents were asked to evaluate “applicants” via SNS with the presence or absence of the attributes such as a professional resume, an emphasis on drinking and family orientation, they ranked the applicants with “unprofessional “ websites and an emphasis on drinking as less attractive and would offer them a lower salary, if hired (Bohnhert and Ross, 2010). Alcohol, along with gambling, presented as information during a hiring process was also the focus of a study (Weathington and Bechtel, 2012). Participants were to evaluate a candidate based on a resume and the candidate’s personal web pages. The presence of alcohol consumption negatively impacted the 5 areas assessed for recommending an interview with the applicant: qualifications, likelihood of a hiring recommendation, expected performance and likelihood of candidate quitting. In contrast, gambling was only significant in the assessment of the likelihood of the candidate quitting.

Goodmon, et al. (2014) conducted a study to determine how SNS content, specifically Facebook content, influences the ability to evaluate personality. Participants in this study were exposed to three types of content: professional, moderately-professional and unprofessional from 3 actual Facebook users who modified their pages to reflect the 3 levels of professional content. Each varied the amount of inappropriate content. Evaluations were then made on the Big Five Personality characteristics and the potential of hiring. Results show a significant effect on the personality dimension. Differences based on the level of professionalism were also found between the respondents’ ratings and the self-ratings of the 3 individuals portrayed in the Facebook profiles. Interestingly, willingness to hire was not affected.

In an earlier, similar study, participants were able to accurately determine high and low scorers in the Big 5 personality dimensions from actual, non-manipulated Facebook profiles, when compared to the self-reported or true scores (Kluemper and Rosen, 2009).

Participants, in a study regarding faux pas postings (Roulin, 2014), were placed in an experimental condition which manipulated the proportion of employers using SNS to evaluate candidates (high versus low) and the degree of privacy invasions by employers (no information on invasion versus information on invasion), and were then measured on the likelihood of engaging in self-promotion behaviors online as well as the likelihood of utilizing ten types of faux pas postings. A faux pas posting is one that may hinder the individual’s chances of getting a job, such as posting pictures related to alcohol consumption or drug use. Results show that participants were likely to alter their social media profile when it was known that recruiters actively sought information from the SNS, to “adapt their behavior to match employers’ selection criteria and strategies.”

## Method

While work has started in understanding the uses of SNS for recruiting, additional research is necessary to fully understand who is using SNS for hiring decisions and how those decisions are made in light of the SNS content being evaluated.

In the current research, an electronic survey was administered to recruiters registered through a campus career services department. Items measured included social media behavior, evaluations of particular types of content (religious, drugs, sexual, etc.), the use of social media in recruiting and demographic variables.

## Hypotheses

Individuals post various activities and opinions on their social media platforms. It is expected that these different types of content will have different levels of acceptance among the recruiters. For example, illegal activities will garner a more negative response than profanity. It is expected that in general, the less socially acceptable behaviors will be rated as more negative than the more acceptable behaviors, such as volunteerism.

It is also expected that demographic groupings will provide differences in evaluations of content types, especially between gender and age groups. Younger recruiters are likely to have more experience with SNS, both from posting themselves and viewing others' posts. They are also closer in age to most of the likely recruits seeking a position and more aware of the norms for the younger SNS users than would be an older recruiter. Studies have shown that gender plays a role in how SNS are used and the types of posts made.

Recruiters were also asked their level of agreement with several statements regarding the usefulness of SNS sites for evaluating potential employees and how far a recruiter could go when utilizing SNS. It is expected that there will be differences again mainly due to age and experience with SNS.

## Results

Respondents represented a variety of industries, from local to international and with less than 100 to over 1000 employees. A majority of the individual respondents had experience in using social media personally; 161 had at least one social media account and 118 of those signed into their account at least once a day. Both male and female recruiters were represented with a wide range of ages. All but 4 of the respondents had more than a high school education.

Out of the 202 usable responses, 162 of the organizations represented had at least 1 social media account. The most used social media account was Facebook with 152 organizations represented. Other social media platforms used were Twitter,

LinkedIn and Google+, with 91, 85 and 29 organizations using, respectively. Instagram, Pinterest, MySpace and SecondLife were also represented. The organizations responded that all the platforms, except Pinterest, were used to advertise job positions, with Facebook being used the most (68), followed by LinkedIn (58).

When asked about their use of social media to evaluate job applicants, overall, these organizations were only moderately active. Only 31 replied that the organization searches for every applicant’s social media profile and 44 search, but not for every applicant. A total of 112 responded either searching not very often or not at all.

In examining content type and how negatively or positively it was evaluated, there were significant differences ( $p \leq .05$ ) between most all content types. See Table 1 for a listing of the content and mean score. As expected, illegal activities, in this case drug use, were rated very negatively – a 1.12 mean on a scale of 1 – 5 where 1 = Very Negative and 5 = Very Positive. Volunteer/Donation Activities received the most positive score with a mean of 4.29. Content displaying spelling/grammar mistakes were rated statistically the same as content with alcohol, with means of 2.09 and 2.12, respectively.

When evaluating difference in ratings for gender and age, again significant differences were found. The main difference between the age groups was in the evaluation of content displaying alcohol. In general, this was seen more negatively by the older age groups. See Table 2 for means. The mean of respondents within the ages of 50-59 was 1.68, while the age groups 21 – 29 and 31-39 had means of 2.53 and 2.23 respectively. This resulted in a significant difference ( $p = .00$ ) between the older and the two younger aged groups. No other significant differences were found between the age groups.

**Table 1 – SNS Content Means\***

Content Type	Mean	Content Type	Mean
Illegal Drugs	1.12	Religious Content	3.02
Sexual Content	1.51	Hobbies/Interest Content	3.36
Profanity	1.69	Content displaying Creativity	3.97
Spelling/Grammar Mistakes	2.10	Professional Organization Membership	4.06
Pictures with Alcohol	2.12	Volunteer/Donation Activities	4.29
Political Content	2.62		

\* 1 = Very Negative and 5 = Very Positive

**Table 2: SNS Content Means by Age Group\***

Content Type	21-29 Years	30-39 Years	40-49 Years	50-59 Years	60 or Older
Illegal Drugs	1.28	1.04	1.05	1.08	1.27
Sexual Content	1.81	1.49	1.53	1.33	1.47
Profanity	1.86	1.79	1.62	1.63	1.53
Spelling/Grammar Mistakes	2.17	2.17	2.11	2.03	1.93
Pictures with Alcohol	2.53	2.23	2.19	1.68	1.93
Political Content	2.81	2.68	2.65	2.58	2.13
Religious Content	3.11	3.09	2.89	2.98	2.93
Hobbies/Interest Content	3.39	3.28	3.38	3.49	3.29
Content Displaying Creativity	4.03	4.09	3.70	4.08	3.85
Professional Organization Membership	4.00	4.17	4.05	4.15	4.07
Volunteer/Donation Activities	4.37	4.48	4.31	4.23	3.79

\* 1 = Very Negative and 5 = Very Positive

Men and women rated some factors differently. Women rated more negatively than men content displaying illegal drugs (1.07 vs. 1.21), creativity (3.90 vs. 4.13), and alcohol (2.00 vs. 2.37). These were significant at the .00 to .04 level.

Slight differences were found when asking recruiters about the value of using SNS and how it should be used. Younger recruiters were more likely to agree that SNS could be a valuable tool to find the best employees and that information found on SNS could be used to confirm information provided during the interview phase of the recruiting process. Stronger levels of agreement were found as one moved from the older to younger groups of respondents. On a 1 – 5 scale where 1 = Strongly Agree, the 21 – 29 age group mean was 1.94 for the statement “Social media is a valuable tool recruiters can use to find the best employees” while for the over 60 age group, the mean was 3.00. This was significant at .003. For the statement “Social media content can be used to confirm information provided during the interview or on the application,” the 21 – 29 age group mean was 2.11 and the 50-59 age group mean was 2.95, significant at .015.

## Implications and Conclusion

Learning that significant differences exist based on age of evaluator, gender of evaluator, and profile content, applicants clearly should tailor their SNS profiles in

ways that enhance selection opportunities. As Table 1 indicates, a range of content areas evoke different responses by evaluators. The cognizant applicant will edit their SNS presence to create an image that accounts for the broadest set of positive and few negative factors. Of course, at the moment, only about 20% (31 of 162) responding firms use SNS to screen every applicant and only 27% (44 of 162) claim to use SNS, but not for every applicant. Risk-taking applicants may view this roll-of-the-dice as a minimal risk and decide to tailor their SNS profiles to their own tastes. As faculty, we must dissuade this approach and convince students that in thinking about the employment impact of SNS profiles, a safe-better-than-sorry approach makes the most sense.

In conclusion, more empirical research in many directions needs to be performed. Since recruiters are already making use of SNS, job applicants need to be aware of how their SNS can be beneficial and harmful to their future employment. Most applicants are probably aware that some site clean-up needs to occur, but additional information concerning what employers are looking for, how it is evaluated and what content is the most beneficial would be very valuable to the job seeker in the SNS environment.

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