

**PLATFORM ASSUMPTIONS:
PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA PARTICIPATION AND NON-PARTICIPATION IN HIRING DECISIONS**

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ABSTRACT

Internet platforms increasingly facilitate professional connections and, as such, play an important role in the hiring process. Yet, relatively little is known about how job seekers view their own use of these networks or the choice to opt out of using social media platforms. In this study, students at a university in the Midwestern United States were asked to rank three hypothetical job candidates and provide their reasons for doing so. Qualifications of the three candidates were similar, but social media profiles were not. As expected, the candidate with a professionally inappropriate profile was ranked last, with assumptions that bad behavior or a lack of discretion on social media would carry over to the workplace. The candidate with a strong professional social media presence was ranked first, with common descriptions of him as “involved,” “connected,” and “active.” The candidate with no social media profile prompted responses ranging from an assumption of social awkwardness to a lack of technical skill to a propensity for hard work or grounded-ness. The unanimous assumption was that even if the candidate did not currently have a social media profile, he would have to develop one in the future. No allowance was made for the possibility that the candidate might have a philosophical reason, such as protection of information privacy, for not engaging in social media. These findings suggest that not only can a professionally inappropriate social media presence hurt a job seeker, but that the lack of a social media presence can also cause significant difficulty. Larger issues for policy makers include access to computer technology, internet access, and training, along with a consideration of laws or guidelines about how information drawn from social media platforms may be used in the hiring process.

KEYWORDS

Social media platforms, employment screening, hiring decisions

INTRODUCTION

Internet platforms such as LinkedIn and Facebook increasingly facilitate professional connections and, as such, play an important role in the hiring process. Likewise, job candidates’ social media presence on Facebook, Twitter, or other social media sites may also be considered. Although the legality of this kind of scrutiny varies by jurisdiction, job seekers must assume that, in practice, the entirety of their social media presence may be examined. In this environment, job seekers have several options: 1) work to create a positive social media image by attempting to delete potentially damaging content while adding professionally appealing content; 2) leave content as it is and hope employers do not discover damaging content; or 3) disengage from social media by deleting accounts or not setting them up in the first place.

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Despite profound professional consequences, how potential job seekers view these options is not well understood. University students, one of the main groups attempting to apply for jobs in this environment, are some of the most ardent users of social media, and yet their own decision-making milieu largely remains a mystery. When these individuals are on the job market, how do they view their own participation or non-participation in social media sites? What assumptions do they believe are being made about them as social media users, and how do they believe these assumptions will affect hiring decisions? These questions are important to consider because they can help policy makers, educators, and employers take effective actions to support sound and ethical behavior on all sides in the hiring process.

In order to address these questions, an exercise was developed to observe attitudes about posting behaviors on social media sites and to help participants become more self-aware about their social media presence. In the exercise, each participant was asked to play the part of a hiring manager and to rank three potential candidates for an internship. By playing this role, participants would engage in the hiring process from employer's side and envision the role of social media in their own prospects as a job candidate. How this exercise affected students' outlook about their own social media use was reported by Miller, Melton, and Jensen (2015). Results showed that the exercise had only minimal effects on students' perceptions about the effects their own behavior on social media.

The current study uses a qualitative analysis of the comments in the exercise to provide insight into the role social media played in the participants' own simulated hiring decisions. This analysis is important because it identifies not only the way job candidates were ranked but begins to reveal the perceptions and assumptions that were made about them. A better understanding of perceptions about social media use—or its absence—can inform the decisions of educational policy makers and of human resources scholars and professionals.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Much of the extant literature focuses on recruiters' use of social media in the hiring process. Recruiters use social media for purposes ranging from disseminating information to evaluating applicants (Caers and Castelyns, 2010, Klier et al., 2015 and Melanthiou et al., 2015). Despite ethical concerns (Lam, 2016; Wheatcroft, 2016) and some differences in approach to evaluation by national culture and gender (El Ouiridi, et al, 2016), recruiters generally find social media to be a valuable way to screen applicants (Sameen & Cornelius, 2015; Chiang, et al, 2015; Klier et al., 2015; Melanthiou et al., 2015). Social media is thought to be a valuable source of information that is available and transparent (Ollington, 2013) as well as potentially more accurate than crafted resumes and other documents (Berkelaar, 2014).

A smaller number of studies focus on the job candidate's side of the equation. Not surprisingly, there has long been agreement in the literature that content perceived as unprofessional is generally harmful to candidates' chances to move forward in the hiring process (Bohnert & Ross, 2010; Brown & Vaughn, 2011). Root and McKay (2014) studied student awareness of employers' use of social media screening: "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" (p. 202). Several studies have focused on underlying factors, including self-disclosure on social media (El Ouiridi, et al, 2015; Christofides, et al, 2009) and the complexities of individuals' decisions about making alcohol-related posts (Goodwin, et al, 2016). Other studies have examined college students' posting behavior in light of their awareness of its potential inappropriateness (Peluchette & Karl, 2009; Miller & Melton, 2015).

While job candidates' use of social media has been addressed in the literature, very little attention has been given to the circumstance of job candidates who choose to "opt out" of having a social media presence and how this affects hiring decisions. The number of job seekers who do not use social media is likely small; yet, this is an important area to address for several reasons. First, many individuals who have concerns about the impact of social media use on information privacy (Lanier, 2011; Ceglowski, 2014) may have philosophical grounds for abstaining from its use, and the latitude individuals have to make this choice is worthy of study on ethical grounds. Second, a greater understanding of these issues can help address the practical concerns of both employers and job seekers. Finally, study of these issues can lead us to a larger exploration of the assumptions we make as a society—what we read into social media use, what it signals, and why societal conditions can make opting out of social media technology difficult.

METHODS

The study sample was drawn from an introductory business course offered to undergraduate students attending a large university in the Midwestern United States. Fifty-six participants were given a resume for each candidate, along with a short summary of each candidate's social media profile, as prepared by a hypothetical human resources department. The candidates were intentionally created with very similar educational qualifications, work histories, and profiles. All three candidates had common names for males in the United States.

The only significant distinguishing factor on the resumes was the candidates' GPAs, which varied slightly. Reports from human resources summarizing the candidates' social media profiles were considerably more diverse. Candidate 1's summary included friends' posts about his excessive partying, following some potentially gender-offensive Twitter accounts, and occasionally "liking" friends' posts that contained gender and racial slurs. Candidate 2's summary noted that he had no social media presence at all. Candidate 3's summary noted that he was an active social media user and that his posts mostly involved the student organization that he was a member of and the activities that the organization promoted.

In addition to ranking the job candidates in order of preference, participants were asked to explain in written comments why they ranked each candidate as they did. This written content was captured and coded using open coding (Flick, 2002). Qualitative analysis was then performed to identify major patterns and themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994) in the participants' evaluations of the hypothetical job candidates.

FINDINGS

Three categories of participant evaluation emerged from the data: 1) those for whom appropriate professional social media use was prized, while unprofessional social media use was seen as disqualifying; 2) those for whom social connectivity of any kind was prized, with grades being a secondary consideration; 3) those for whom grades were prized, with social media being a secondary consideration. For the purposes of this study, the ranking of Candidate 2, who did not have a social media profile was the most interesting feature.

It was expected that Candidate 1, named "Thomas Brown," who had the highest GPA but a negative social media profile would be ranked last by a majority of participants, and this was indeed the case, with 44 of the 56 respondents ranking him last. The themes that emerged from this ranking were diverse but centered around poor judgment that would affect proficiency at work. Some respondents placed Candidate 1's social media activity in the context of everyday employee behavior: would his evident frequent partying mean he would show up for work late? Others emphasized risks for the company related to offensive gender- or race-related content connected with his social media profile, even if he wasn't the one who posted it. Would he make the company look bad? Still others emphasized not his behavior but his lack of discretion; in other words, the lack of concern about how he was being portrayed in social media showed a lack of judgment. "Would he talk about a customer [on social media]?" Several participants wondered how this behavior would translate into the professional world. This lack of discretion and "maturity," a word that was frequently used, was seen as the problem, not necessarily the activities themselves. Only four respondents apparently ignored the negative aspects of Candidate 1's social media presence while valuing the fact that he was socially connected.

It was also expected that Candidate 3, named "Jon Williams," who had the lowest GPA but an impressive social media profile, would be ranked first by a majority of participants. This occurred, with 42 of the 56 participants ranking him first. Jon was seen as "connected," "professional," "mature," "responsible," "tech savvy," "passionate," "pro-active," and, most of all, "active" and "involved." These assessments were levied despite the fact that the involvements and qualifications listed on Jon's resume were largely equivalent with the other candidates.

As anticipated, Candidate 2, "Ryan Smith," whose GPA was between the other two candidates but had no apparent social media presence, was most often ranked second—with 40 of the 56 respondents placing him there—but the diverse reasons why were of primary interest to the researchers. The greatest divergence occurred in participants' speculation about why Candidate 2 did not have a social media profile, along with other inferences about what online behavior suggested about a given candidate's offline behavior and potential work performance. Most participants viewed the lack of social media as possibly negative but not disqualifying. One typical comment expressed a common sentiment that connected the lack of social media to a lack of social skills: "He is not active on social media, which is good, but it shows that he is not well connected with people and may lack personal skills." A lack of technical skill was also a common speculation about the candidate. A small minority of participants who

ranked Candidate 2 as the second choice saw the lack of social media as positive or neutral: “No social media but that’s ok. We could use some more grounded people” or “No social media image is better than a negative one.” Some participants, albeit a small minority, ranked Candidate 2 last. They assumed that the lack of a social media profile meant that the candidate, in the words of one participant, “might have deleted everything to hide something.” In other words, it was inconceivable that a person would not have a social media presence, and the most likely explanation was a cover-up of bad behavior. A common, related concern was the risk that “we don’t know anything about him.” This response was made, ironically, despite a complete resume from the candidate.

Despite the diversity of these responses to Candidate 2’s lack of social media presence, there were some common themes that ran through the participants’ opinions. Many participants expressed the idea that although he did not have social media, he could (and should) learn it on the job. Though there were a few respondents who saw the lack of social media as evidence of someone who was “grounded” or didn’t waste time, not a single participant expressed the idea that Candidate 2 might have a philosophical reason—for example, a wish to avoid engaging in activities that might compromise information privacy—for not participating in social media. It was also common to speculate that Candidate 2 was not connected, social, or involved.

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

These findings reflect the difficulty that may be faced by job seekers who choose not to engage in social media. The perception of not only social connectedness but also social skills seem to be connected to having a social media presence. This development is ironic when it is considered a decade and a half ago, individuals who relied on computers as a main channel of communication were thought to be socially awkward or a-social. A lack of connectedness to social networks is still an option, but it seems to have consequences for those who are applying for jobs and perhaps for promotion or other kinds of employment evaluation. Likewise, it seems the nature of the content that is posted can affect the prospects of job seekers.

Policy makers in educational institutions and governments should examine these issues in more depth to facilitate individuals’ engagement with social media. Special consideration should be given to policies that affect access to computers and the Internet, along with an education in how to use social media on the job market and in the workplace. The use of social media as a source of information about job candidates should also be weighed against concerns of privacy and freedom of speech. Such considerations can affect the personal fortunes of individual job seekers and also the openness and overall connectedness of the Internet, and by extension of society.

This research provides a basis for continued research that can inform policy makers, educators, and employers in efforts to support professional and ethical behavior. These preliminary findings can lead to more in-depth study of job seekers’ perceptions about how employers evaluate social media presence in making hiring decisions.

Follow-up research is in process, with task contained in this paper to a larger number of students, along with an additional study that will ask job recruiters to perform a similar exercise—to evaluate otherwise comparable candidates who have differing social media profiles. As with the current study, a major focus will be on responses to and assumptions about those candidates who appear to have “opted out” of social media. A better understanding of our responses to these candidates, along with those who use social media well or poorly, can inform policy makers, educators, and individuals as they adjust and adapt to the new realities posed by the ubiquity of social media platforms in professional contexts.

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