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Help or Hindrance: How social media affects the selection and hiring processes of businesses

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I. Introduction

Social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have been prevalent places for young adults to share their lives continuously for the past 20 years. Young adults are advised to be conscientious of the imagery they put on social media regarding their personal lives in preparation for future employment selection. It is thought that the use of social media in the selection process may cause Human Resource professionals to have inadvertent biases toward candidates among other moral and ethical issues. Professionals are concerned with discrimination, biases, and when visualizing the impacts of the usage of social media when making hiring decisions, but limited research has been done to bring these issues to light and little work has been done to mitigate these inherent issues.

Discrimination and bias within hiring processes have long been discouraged by the EEOC, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, through their enforcement of the Civil Rights Laws as produced in 1964 which prohibit the workplace discrimination of employees based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin. But with social media bringing light to issues such as ongoing discrimination and inequality, as well as personal information being easier to find and synthesize, it is now harder than ever to decipher the use of discrimination. Hiring processes are becoming more and more debatable as the selection and recruitment climate becomes more uncertain.

Through extensive research of the thoughts and actions of a plethora of different corporate professionals and students, this research will analyze the usage of social media on both sides of the equation. With the hopes to create less biased and more standardized corporate recruitment strategies, this research aims to expose the mindsets of professional human resource

staff through a series of assessments that will produce a claim to whether businesses should continue the use of social media as a selection tool in the future.

This research was aimed at identifying what both students and hiring professionals know about the hiring processes and their level of entanglement with social media. Do students understand whether or not hiring professionals are looking at their social media? Are students changing their content they post because of potential usage in hiring processes? And are students posting content that is a true reflection of themselves, or are they only posting the highlights of their lives? On the other hand, are hiring professionals using social media as an official or unofficial part of the hiring process? What social medias are actually being utilized? And how do their researched qualities of their applicants change from what they think they are going to research about their applicant, to what they actually end up making judgements of their candidate on? All of these questions answered together can provide evidence to companies on how to manage their processes in the future so that biases are taken out of the equation.

The mitigation of discrimination and bias throughout the recruitment and selection process for applicants can create a more unbiased and equitable hiring practices for marginalized groups and others who may be discriminated against. Additionally, this analysis could impact many company issues such as turnover rate, profit margins, and employee satisfaction throughout the company by assessing the amount of liability associated with the usage of social media in the selection process.

II. Literature Review

What is social media?

Social media as defined by the Oxford dictionary is “websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking.” Compared to

other movements, social media is a fairly new trend. With Six Degrees premiering as the first budding social media site in 1997, LinkedIn in 2002, MySpace in 2003, and FaceBook in 2004, thousands of social media sites have taken their space in people's lives and as a result, changed the way we act and make decisions (Muhammed 2019).

Social Media is a form of communication that creates a highly collaborative environment of sharing content, discourse, and provides space for visual interactions amongst its users (Power 2014). Rather than the slow and time-consuming face-to-face interactions social media allows users to reach billions of other users instantaneously at low or no cost to the user (Power 2014).

Today, social media is essential as users depend on the information provided on these sites to learn, to collaborate, to share, and to communicate (Whiting & Williams 2013). While social media adoption was highly generational where newer generations were generally predisposed to higher adoption, the necessity of social media today is a priority. Without the forms of social media, we have gotten used to as a culture and global community, we would lose the best form of communication we have. Over two-thirds of adults and 91% of adolescents aged 13-17 use social media according to Pew Research Center showing the generational differences with the use of social media (Smith 2011).

Social media Usage in Recruitment

Social Recruiting is a channel that recruiters use to find potential applicants by posting on job forums, and social media sites such as LinkedIn. 94% of recruiters use or plan to use social media when recruiting and 89% of recruiters report finding employees on LinkedIn (Medved 2014). Social media is used during recruitment to open the pool of applicants, thus, creating more opportunities for businesses to find qualified applicants, but social media also opens the pool to a mass number of unqualified candidates (Breagh 2008). This can create opportunities

where the most qualified applicant may not be chosen, or the candidate pool is too large to work through in a timely manner.

There are also positives when using social media for recruitment such as shortening the recruitment time, more candidates, and showcasing the company's brand (Martic 2022).

Organizational fit has become more important to businesses as a potential retention strategy (Alarcon 2019). Finding those who fit the company's culture is often no easy task and something that many HR professionals may find troubling, so the use of social media is often a way that they can overcome this issue and lessen the difficulty. Organizational fit also goes both ways, while recruiters are finding applicants that meet their needs, those same potential applicants are looking for organizations that meet their expectations (Alarcon 2019).

However, social media is not always a positive endeavor, and sometimes leads to negative impacts in decision making. An example of how social media can negatively affect applicant's hiring decisions, Vicki Morris, current CEO of Face-to-Face Marketing, described in an interview that she herself has made harsh hiring decisions based on what she found on an applicant's social media (Taylor 2021). Morris disclosed that in her previous position, she was responsible for making recruitment and hiring decisions (Taylor 2021). One day, she found a candidate that met all the criterion on paper, so Morris decided to look at her Facebook and Instagram profiles before the interview (Taylor 2021). What she found was "nude photos" from a "planned photoshoot" and instances of "profanity used in captions" (Taylor 2021). Due to the content found on the applicant's social media, Morris determined that the applicant "did not have an image that would be a fit to represent the family-friendly business", and subsequently did not hire the applicant, citing "That [it] would be a potentially huge credibility hit to the company." (Taylor 2021).

Social Media Validity in hiring and selection

Because of the recentness of the social media trend, there is scarce data about the validity of using social media in the hiring process for businesses. However, a recent study found many validity questions when assembling their analysis of social media in a hiring context. Roth, Bobko, Van Iddekinge, and Thatcher's "Social Media in Employee-Selection-Related Decisions: A Research Agenda for Uncharted Territory" (2016) investigated the probable validity questions that result from social media through a complex analysis of available related studies. Positive, negative, incomplete, demographic, and aesthetic information all cause "process issues" when using social media (Roth 2016). Nonetheless, in 2016 over 84% of companies report using this information in their recruitment processes and 36% of companies have disqualified applicants because of the information found on these social networking sites (SHRM 2016). This is a far cry from the number of companies that were using social media in 2009 to aid their hiring processes as only 45% of employers used it then (Olivas-Lujan & Bondarouk 2013).

The 'Posting-Paradox' also provides validity questions among HR Professionals when using social media posts to judge applicants. The posting paradox examines the issue that people may be aware that the content they post may be inappropriate for many situations but decide to engage in the behavior anyways (Alarcon 2019). However, not everyone participates in this paradox. Mainly older, more experienced and less educated workers tend to behave in this way (Alarcon 2019). Since, not everyone behaves on social media in the same way or shares the same personal information, it is impossible to create across-the-board examinations by using social media.

In terms of choosing the correct candidate, appearances on social media may have a big say. In a study done by Bohnert and Ross in 2010, HR professionals are more likely to choose

people who present as family-oriented or professional-oriented and those same candidates are more likely to receive interviews and if selected higher salaries (Alarcon 2019).

Social Media Discrimination and Bias

The EEOC, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, has placed laws surrounding what an employer can and cannot ask about in order to protect potential applicants, but social media bridges that gap and allows employers to receive that information anyways, thus, increasing discrimination. Christina Fong, a senior researcher at Carnegie Mellon, proposed that discrimination can be “conscious or unconscious” meaning that sometimes the employer unaware they are being indirectly influenced by what they are seeing on social media (Valentino-DeVries 2013). Fong worked on a piece of research alongside Jennifer Valentino-DeVries, another researcher at Carnegie Mellon, in which they concluded that more than a third of employers utilize social media at least sometimes during the selection process (Valentino-DeVries 2013). Many of these employers said that they utilized social media to find evidence of “unprofessional behavior” or “complaints,” but the research found that social media profiles contribute to “more fundamental discrimination” (Valentino-DeVries 2013). Mr. Acquisti, a professor and fellow researcher at Carnegie Mellon, concluded this fact with the statement “By and large, employers avoid asking questions about [professionalism and life status] in interviews. But now technology makes it easier to find that information.” (Valentino-DeVries 2013). Additionally, Chad Van Iddekinge, a professor at the University of Iowa, wrote that “one of the hallmarks of legal hiring practices is that they focus on behaviors within the work context. There should be a clear distinction between what people do during work and what they do outside of it.” (Wong 2021).

Many companies use social media as a tool to help in the decision-making process. Because it is assumed that these applicants don't think that employers are looking at their social media, it is believed to be a more accurate and reliable source of data about potential employees (Davison, Maraist & Bing 2011). However, the data found on applicant's social media can be spewed to show a different persona, and in return, employers have a biased and incorrect view of the potential employee (Davison, Maraist & Bing 2011). According to the impression management theory, people will make every attempt they can to supervise and manipulate the perceptions others have of them, so in consequence people will try to post what they want people to see on social media, not what is reality (Vazire & Gosling 2004).

HR professionals are confident that the side effects of social media do not provide unconscious biases against protected clauses of the Civil Rights Act, among other personal identities, but there is little data to support that claim (Jeske & Shultz 2016). Even if the unethical behavior is accidental, the danger of the misconception of neutrality can shape decision making in a negative way (Stanwick & Stanwick 2009). The unconscious biases of HR managers and decision-makers of companies play a big role in how the business performs, so to ensure neutrality is of the utmost necessity.

III. Methodology

Two surveys were created to see the different viewpoints on social media from both a student standpoint and an industry professional standpoint to answer the questions of what is the current role of social media in selection and recruitment and how social media may provide bias within the same processes. It is obvious that the two groups will have different standpoint, views,

and experiences with social media in a business environment, so by creating two surveys to better understand and describe the inherent differences, the research will see the downfalls and opportunities of the two groups.

Student Experimental Design

Throughout the course of the experiment a total of 55 undergraduate student across The University of Arkansas were surveyed. The vastness of the group in terms of areas of study allowed for research to be compiled among many different subsets of potential industries that these students plan on applying for, thus increasing the room for differences among students. When surveying the students, the survey started with asking the student if they had any social media in general. If they answered no to having social media, they were asked if they thought social media was utilized in selection processes, and how it was being utilized. If they answered yes, they were asked questions about what social media sites they used and how they used them (ie: private vs. non-private, what they post, and if they think their social media is a true representation of themselves). After describing their usage, they were asked if they thought potential employers utilized social media to make judgements on them during application processes.

Industry Professional Experimental Design

For standardization's sake, the experimental design of the industry professional survey was very similar to the student survey. The research produced survey results from 29 industry professionals. The survey started with asking if the participant had ever taken part in a hiring process. If not, the participant would be asked if they believed that social media was used in hiring processes, if it will become more prevalent, and if it provided biases. On the other hand, if they answered yes to being part of hiring processes, they were routed to a question asking if they

ever used social media while they were making choices regarding the applicants. If no, they were re-routed to the questions that the participants who answered no to the hiring processes were asked. If yes, they were asked a series of questions about what social media(s) they looked at, how far back, and what they looked for within the social media. After answering those questions, those participants were then routed to the same questions asked of the other two participant groups. Having 3 different groups asked the same questions even though they have different experiences, allowed for the ability to see the difference in opinion that stemmed from each group.

IV. Results

Demographics of participants

A majority of students surveyed were business students (60.4% or 33 students), because of the area of schooling the survey was produced in. Out of the business sector 1.9% were accounting students, 9.4% Finance students, 3.8% information systems students, 22.6% supply chain management students, 17% marketing students, 3% Management students. Outside of business, other areas of study were engineering (11.3%), Health Professions (9.4%), and education (18.9%).

Most students were in the age group demographic of 18-24 (94.5%) and only 3 students made up the remaining 5.5% in the age group 25-34.

Of the 29 industry professionals surveyed, many of those worked within the consumer-packaged goods or retail industry (36.6%). Other notable industries were supply chain (20.6%), recreation (13.6%), and finance (6.8%). Of these industries, job titles were very thinly distributed ranging from Analysts to directors.

Additionally, the age distribution of the industry professionals was different from students. There were still a majority of participants in the 18–24-year-old range (44%), but 31% of respondents were within the 25-34 age range, 10.3% were between 35-44, 6.9% were between 45-54, 3.4% were between 55-64 and 65-74.

Student Results

All 55 student respondents reported having 1 or more social media accounts. The most commonly utilized social media site being Instagram with 52 of the 55 student participants, after that is Facebook and LinkedIn with 50 and 41 students participating in those networks. Additionally, on those accounts, 60% of students noted that a majority of their social media accounts were private, meaning that only friends could access the posted content on their accounts. In many situations this is done to prevent strangers from seeing their content, and in this context, prevents potential employers from utilizing their social media when making decisions about them.

According to the student respondents, 60% either somewhat agrees or strongly agreed that their social media is a true reflection of who they are including aspects like personality, beliefs, and values. This is in comparison to only 21.9% somewhat or strongly disagreeing and 18.2% choosing neither agree/disagree. This is important to note because if recruiters and other professionals in charge of hiring decisions are looking at these students' social media accounts, students are deciding that their social medias are “accurate” in terms of displaying who they are instead of who they want to be. This answers a major question from the background research phase of: is social media a “true” reflection of applicants? Additionally, many of the students show they only make choices of what to post on social media and its viewing by recruiters and employers a moderate amount of time (36.4%). 32% of students consider employers viewing

their social media a lot or a great deal, and on the other hand 27% of students only consider this a little. By the heavy skewing to the middle of the scale (moderate amount) it is safe to say that students would consider the impacts to their choices to the posts they make about half of the time. Coupled with the fact that a vast majority of students describe their social medias as accurate representations of themselves, this could cause them to not consider employers when they post.

Even though a majority of students believe that their social media accounts accurately represent themselves, and a majority of students describe only considering employer and recruiters viewing these accounts about half the time, this doesn't prevent others from weighing in on their posting habits. 81.8% of students report someone in their lives telling them to not post something on social media because of potential future selection and hiring decisions.

Above all, a majority of the student respondents (96.4%) assume that recruiters are utilizing social media to judge their hiring potential. This concludes the fact that even though the students might not consider the impacts of every post, they do believe that their social media will be scrutinized during every hiring process they take part in. This is an important data point to make because it shows the knowledge that students have about the hiring process and the biases and judgements about themselves, they are knowingly building through social media posts.

Industry Professional Results

Of the 29 Industry professional respondents, 20 (70%) of those professionals have taken part in hiring and/or selection processes within their companies. These professionals have direct insights into probable corporate processes and their responses give vision into what is actually occurring when companies make decisions on applicants. However, even those other 9 respondents who answered "no" to utilizing social media within their recruitment processes show

that even though a majority do use social networking sites, some companies/professionals prefer to stay off them.

Of those who utilize social media, most use the same networking sites. LinkedIn has the highest users at 52% of respondents, and both Instagram and Facebook are used by 24% of respondents. This was expected because of the high business focus of LinkedIn's design. Additionally, this coincides with several questions asked of the student participants. LinkedIn was high on both sides of the equation as 48.8% of students say they use social media, and 30% of students report being asked for their LinkedIn URL (Uniform Resource Locator) at some point during the recruitment and selection process.

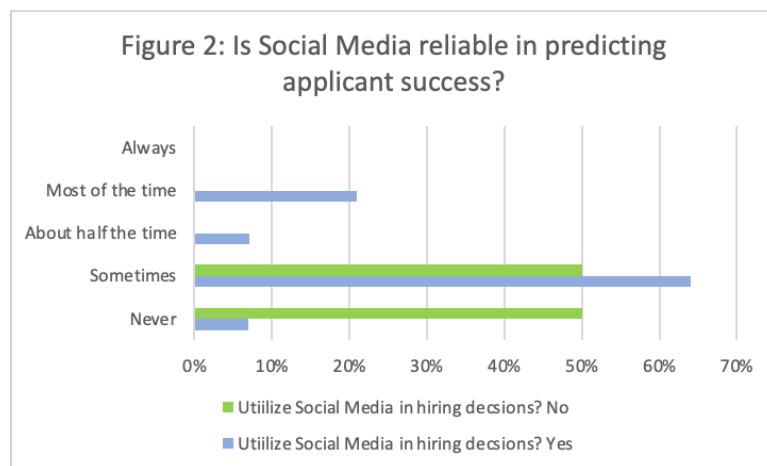
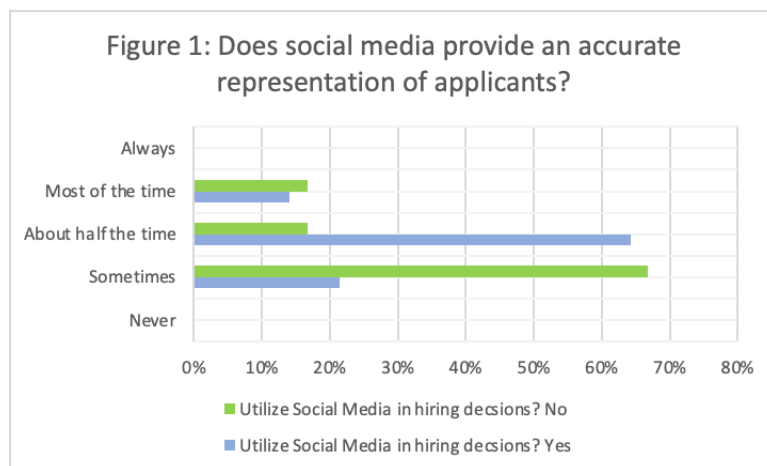
Professionals who expressed using social media showed slight differences in the qualities they originally went to social media to observe and what they actually judged their applicants on. 34% of responses detailed Professionalism as their highest priority when looking at social media. Organizational skills and job relevant skills trailed at 25% and 15% respectively with personality and public opinions trailing 12.5% and 9%. However, changes did occur between what respondents originally thought they were observing and what information they actually utilized. Professionalism did hold a 11.1% decrease and organizational skills showed a 2.1% decrease, but job relevant skills increased by 5.8%, personality increased by 3.5%, and public opinion increased by 7%. This gives insight into how biases can appear. If a respondent specifically goes to a social media site to research a specific quality, they take in much more for information than that primary quality they are searching for. Because there is so much information present, the researcher, in this case the industry professional utilizing social media, is predisposed to making judgements on more than they originally intended. In this example many of the professionals

wanted to judge their applicants on their professionalism; however, they ended up judging the applicants on other characteristics such as public opinions and personality.

The top three reasons that industry professionals choose to not use social media while selecting top talent is because of privacy concerns (83.3%), possible biases (83.3%), and unreliable information about their candidates (83.3%). On the other hand, half of the respondents concluded that it was not because of organizational guidelines that they strayed from utilizing social media. Additionally, 100% of those who use social media in hiring decisions describe it as being an “unofficial” part of the selection process in terms of process guidelines. Therefore, even though social media is not restricted in terms of companies barring employees from using social media, it is not a detailed part of a company’s recorded processes. This brings up the question whether hiring process outlines should detail whether using social media is allowed or not allowed instead of leaving it up to the individual professional to choose in order to ensure equivalent research is being done with every applicant.

In figures 1 and 2 which detail if the respondents believe that social media provides an accurate representation of applicants (Figure 1), and if social media is reliable when predicting applicant success (Figure 2). The results of the survey show that people who use social media think of social media as highly reliable and accurate, seeing as 21.3% of respondents who use social media responded “probably yes” to the question asking about its reliability, however, 0% of those who did not use social media answered above the midway point on the scale on the same question, proving to be more cautious of social media when talking about reliability for future success. The same story can be told on the accuracy question. Participants who answered “yes” to utilizing social media demonstrate greater attitudes toward the accuracy of social media as 14.3% denoted social media being accurate most of the time, 64.3% saying half of the time, and

only 21.4% responding half of the time; whereas, those who do not use social media are more reserved. Only 16.7% responded that social media is accurate about half of the time, and 66.7% say that it is only accurate sometimes.



V. Discussion

There were two primary purposes of this research. The first purpose was to identify potential usage of social media by industry professionals that participate in hiring decisions. The second purpose was to establish if students, who are largely incoming applicants, are utilizing

social media in ways that present themselves authentically, and have the knowledge of future judgements from employers. The research identified that most industry professionals do utilize social media and that many students understand that the recruiters are looking at their social media. However, the content students choose to post has little to do with future employment. This presents new ideas as with many past researchers, many operate under the belief that student's social media personalities are often different than the real person. However, there is only a small percentage of people who are not authentic on social media. In this research, 21.9% identified they are not their true selves on social media. If industry professionals are conducting their research with this in mind, they are going to assume a majority of what they find online to be true, even when about 22% could be false representations. Professionals need to keep this in mind when conducting social media research on their candidates to ensure they do not make decisions on false content.

With the results of the surveys in mind, it is very apparent that social media is widely used in making hiring decisions and the students who are routinely on the other side of these processes know the implications behind their posts. Even though students consistently report their social media as being "true representations" of who they are industry professionals are not as easily convinced. There may be a small generational gap causing the differences in beliefs of what social media posts actually contain. As many of the studied industry professionals report being a part of the youngest group of millennials and the students being the oldest class of generation Z, there may be correlation for a difference in the thoughts behind accuracy in social media posts.

In conclusion, an applicant's social media is very present within the selection and hiring procedures, even if it is an unofficial part of the process, and students are very aware of this fact.

This is important for hiring decision makers to understand and use this knowledge because if the more aware of their intent, as well as student's usage and posting habits, they can make more informed decisions and work to keep any and all bias away from their decisions. If industry professionals can understand the fact that judgements based off social media can be littered by bias because they often look for one aspect and judge off another, as well as personalities can be construed due to certain content, better and more ethical decisions can be made, thus creating more opportunities for the company as a whole.

Ultimately, because there seems to be inadequate instructions for industry professionals when making hiring decisions in terms of when social media can and cannot be used in hiring decisions, companies should provide detail in what situations social media is and is not allowed to make sure all applicants are examined equally. Due to the fact that everyone uses social media in different ways in terms of content posted, it would be most beneficial for companies to deter their employees from using social media at all by making it part of the official process that social media research is not allowed. However, on the student and other applicant side, it would be most beneficial for them to always take into account that companies may be looking at their social media. This is so they don't provide any ammunition for potential biases if an employer allows or doesn't provide detailed stipulations of social media research on their applicants. By accomplishing these two objectives, companies will be able to further dissuade biases from hiring decisions making the processes more equitable for all applicants.

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