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## Social Media Risk Perceptions of Human Resource Professionals: Issues Undergraduate Students Should Consider

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# Social Media Risk Perceptions of Human Resource Professionals: Issues Undergraduate Students Should Consider

## **Abstract**

This study contrasts the social media risk perceptions of undergraduate students, versus those of certified Human Resource professionals. Social media is widely used by most segments of the population, and particularly among the age group that includes most undergraduate students. Organizations hiring employees are increasingly examining job applicant's social media postings as part of the applicant screening process. In this study we examine how these groups differ in their perceptions of the risks inherent in using social media, and what these differences may mean for students seeking employment. Recommendations are made for raising undergraduate student awareness of these risks.

## **Keywords**

social media risk, delphi, human resource professionals

# **SOCIAL MEDIA RISK PERCEPTIONS OF HUMAN RESOURCE PROFESSIONALS: ISSUES UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS SHOULD CONSIDER**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Social media has become a widely used phenomenon, adopted by a broad spectrum of individuals and extensively used by all manner of organizations. In the United States, surveys indicate that 79% of the population uses some form of social media (Greenwood, Perring, & Duggan, 2016). Individuals use social media in different manners, but in essence, they tend to share details about their personal lives, which might otherwise remain private. Oversharing could be a threat as individuals move into the workforce, as many employers evaluate an individual's social media presence as part of their employment screening process.

By their nature, social media platforms form communities and enable sharing community member's interests, hobbies, opinions, and other personal details. Typically, this information is available to anyone expending a modicum of effort to search for it. In fact, we increasingly see social media profiles and activities revealed by the news media in connection to newsworthy items. For example, shortly after various crimes, news outlets reveal details about the alleged criminal's social media presence. In a similar fashion, employers are increasingly examining job candidates' social media presence to determine their suitability for employment (Segal, 2014).

This paper builds on earlier work that examined undergraduate university students' perceptions of personal social media risk. Given that organizations now possess the ability to access the personal social lives of potential employees, it is important to reconcile how undergraduate, career-minded students and the human resource professionals that will evaluate prospective employees view the dangers of personal social media use. We examine these perceptions by comparing and contrasting prior research with data collected from human resource professionals. Our focus is to examine how the perceptions of these groups differ, and how they might affect career prospects for students aspiring to join the workforce. We believe that individuals, and particularly students, should be aware of the extent to which their online persona may affect their employment prospects.

## **BACKGROUND**

Social media usage among all segments of the population has been steadily increasing. For 2016, the Pew Research Center reports that 68% of all US adults use social media (Greenwood et al., 2016), up from 58% in a similar survey from 2014 (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015). We see similar increases among Internet users, where 79% of online users were active on at least one social media platform in 2016 (Greenwood et al., 2016), an increase from 71% in 2014 (Duggan et al., 2015). In the 18 to 29 year old demographic, we see an increase in social media usage from 87% in 2014 (Duggan et al., 2015), to 88% in 2016 (Greenwood et al., 2016). Finally, for those individuals that use social media, 56% participate in multiple social media platforms (Greenwood et al., 2016).

Of particular interest for this study is the 18 to 29-year-old demographic. By virtue of its age spread, this group is representative of the undergraduate university student population. Compared to other age groups, this demographic makes extensive use of multiple social media platforms (Greenwood et al., 2016). The only platform that shows similar usage by any other age group is LinkedIn (Greenwood et al., 2016), presumably because of its intended use as a career building tool.

Based on earlier research (Rivera, Di Gangi, Worrell, Thompson, & Johnston, 2015), the undergraduate university student's perception of social media risk focuses on personal concerns. Their greatest concern was identity theft, with unintended exposure of information ranked as sixth (out of eleven risks identified) (Rivera et al., 2015). At the bottom of the eleven identified risks was "online content may be stored or indexed" (Rivera et al., 2015). Surprisingly, none of the risks identified dealt directly with concerns related to career prospects.

As this age group moves into the workforce though, their social media usage may become relevant to the employment process. Increasingly, organizations are reviewing a job candidate's social media usage as a part of the employee selection process (Segal, 2014). Although not all organizations engage in this practice, it is important to understand how the employment process works and the role social media usage plays in job applicant evaluation and selection.

When job applicants are evaluated for employment, they go through a selection process. While selection processes often vary, it is common practice to perform background checks on applicants (Levashina & Campion, 2009). Reference checks for potential employees help verify the accuracy of what the applicant has presented to an employer. Oftentimes organizations take a closer look at an applicant's history by conducting a criminal background check. Criminal background checks are deemed necessary due to the nature of job's duties and requirements. This precaution aims to minimize the range of risks to both the organizations and the clientele they serve.

Technology has changed what individuals and organizations have access to as it relates to personal information easily found in the public domain. Individuals, including potential employees, have the ability to share personal information about their actions and thoughts. Many throughout the world have embraced social media as a means for keeping up with friends and family, as well as for making new connections. Likewise, organizations use social media to present themselves to a broader audience, including potential applicants. The ready availability of such information, including the Internet in general, allows potential applicants as well as employers to gather information about the parties in question.

As a common practice, organizations often check social media websites as a means of gathering information about potential applicants, with some requiring applicants to disclose social media usernames and passwords as part of the applicant evaluation process (Dwoskin, Squire, & Patullo, 2014; Grasz, 2016). While no federal restriction is currently in place to restrict these invasions of privacy, some states have passed legislation regulating what organizations can and cannot do as it relates to accessing employee information found on social media websites. Consequently, applicants should assume that potential employers explore their online presence as part of the evaluation process. In some instances, organizations have been held accountable for failing to consider publicly available information about potential employees.

In light of the items discussed previously, it is not surprising that social media usage has resulted in individuals losing jobs or being denied employment in the first place. For example, a job applicant was not considered when a link to a blog in his resume contained personal information that revealed questionable judgment (Poppick, 2014). In fact, even after a job offer has been made and accepted, social media postings have led to those offers being rescinded, as in the case of a woman who posted "Cisco just offered me a job! Now I have to weigh the utility of a fatty paycheck against the daily commute to San Jose and hating the work." (Goh, Di Gangi, Rivera, & Worrell, 2017; Ripton, 2017). How applicants use social media may have an impact on their career prospects.

## **METHODOLOGY**

When examining risk perceptions, it is important to understand the relative importance or severity a risk poses to an individual in relation to other risks. Such an understanding helps minimize uncertainty on how to best manage risks as well as aid in resource allocation. One technique frequently used among information security professionals and organizations seeking to develop conceptual clarity on a given topic is the Delphi method (Worrell, Di Gangi, & Bush, 2013). The Delphi method is a consensus-oriented technique where a panel of experts is organized around a topic of interest. The panel is tasked with identifying the most relevant items relating to the topic of interest (e.g., risks associated with personal social

media use) and uses an iterative, ranking process with feedback to reach consensus on the topic. While a variety of approaches to the Delphi method are possible, a common approach is to provide a seeded list of items that fosters discussion and provides an initial starting point to the panel (e.g., Brancheau & Wetherbe, 1987; Dickinson, Leitheiser, Wetherbe, & Nechis, 1984; Schmidt, 1997; Schmidt, Lyytinen, Keil, & Cule, 2001; Worrell et al., 2013). In this study, we used the seed list originally used by Rivera et al. (2015) to ensure consistency in our comparison analysis.

The key to the success of a Delphi study is its iterative structure that challenges panel members' judgments through anonymous discussion and re-evaluation. Over time, panel members either solidify confidence in their judgment based on personal expertise and experience or become more open-minded to discussion allowing consensus to emerge through joint collaboration and agreement. Kendall's Coefficient of Concordance (Kendall's  $W$ ) is used to determine the degree of consensus reached. This statistic ranges from 0 (indicating no consensus) to 1 (indicating perfect consensus). Values over 0.7 are considered indicators of strong agreement, while values between 0.5 and 0.7 are considered robust in most circumstances (Skinner, Nelson, Chin, & Land, 2015; Worrell et al., 2013).

A seeded, ranking-type Delphi study is relatively simple to administer. An initial round is conducted to reduce the seed-list of items by a general consensus of the majority of the panel members (i.e., 50% or more of the panel indicate item should be retained for discussion). In subsequent rounds, panel members are asked to rank order the remaining items and provide justification for their ranking (e.g., reasoning for most important or top ranked item). A researcher collects all of the panel opinions and computes Kendall's  $W$ . If the value indicates strong consensus amongst the panel, the process terminates and a rank ordered list of items is generated. If not, a new round of ranking is requested with the panel receiving the items in their currently ranked order along with qualitative information summarized from the panel providing justification for each of the items. This process continues until one of the following three conditions is met: (1) Kendall's  $W$  suggests strong consensus ( $W \geq 0.7$ ), (2) a plateau is reached whereby Kendall's  $W$  drops in a subsequent round, or (3) evidence of panel fatigue (a substantial portion of panelists decline to continue the study) (Skinner et al., 2015; Worrell et al., 2013).

We leverage the panel results from Rivera et al. (2015) which included undergraduate students of a small, rural southern university. For the present study, we administered a second ranking-type seeded Delphi study and collected data from Professional Human Resource (PHR) certified human resource employees for comparison. Rivera et al. (2015) panel of undergraduate students was composed of 22 participants, with 86.4% of them between the ages of 18 to 29. For the HR employees, we divided the panelists into two groups based on years certified, with five years or more representing seasoned HR professionals. Initially, the under five-

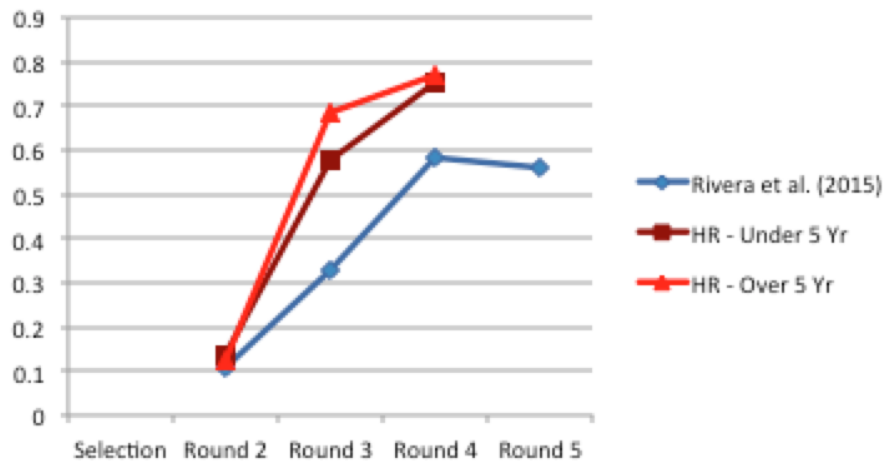
year PHR certified panel was composed of 28 HR professionals, 23 females and 5 males, with an average age of 41.1 years. On average, panelists were PHR certified for 2.4 years with 12.6 years of work experience. Between the initial item reduction round and the first ranking round, 7 HR professionals elected to not continue in the panel and were excluded from further participation.

The over five-year PHR certified panel was initially composed of 23 HR professionals, 21 females and 2 males, with an average age of 47.6 years. On average, panelists were PHR certified for 9.7 years with 17.7 years of work experience. Between the initial item reduction round and the first ranking round, 7 HR professionals elected not to continue in the panel and were excluded from further participation. HR professionals from both panels represented a wide range of industries, including government, healthcare, insurance, manufacturing, and technology consulting.

## RESULTS

The results of the HR panels show several differences between the rankings of HR professionals with less than five years' experience and those with more than five years' experience. Those professionals with more experience ranked "Unintended Exposure of Information" as the highest risk, with "Damage to Personal Reputation" as second highest on their list. Professionals with less experience inverted the order of these top two risks. In general, both groups arrived at a robust consensus, with a Kendall's statistic of 0.752 for the less experienced group, and 0.772 for the more experienced group after three ranking rounds. Given strong consensus was achieved and the loss of 8 HR professionals from the under five-year PHR certified panel and four HR professionals from the over five-year PHR certified panel, we terminated the study and report the final results below.

Figure 1 provides a graphical depiction of Kendall's W over each round. Across all panels, the degree of consensus begins with relatively small agreement but increases substantially once panelists are able to review anonymous feedback and rationales for the social media risks.



**Figure 1. Kendall's W – Study Comparison**

In terms of comparing the HR panels, the panels showed a great deal of disparity in their ranking of social media risks beyond the top two risks. Some items of interest from an employer perspective are the rankings given to “Personal Views Perceived as Sanctioned/Approved by Employer” and “Online Content May Facilitate Discriminatory Hiring Practices”. The less experienced panel ranked the risk of discriminatory hiring practices higher than the personal views risk, while the more experienced group ranked these in opposite order. At the bottom of the list for both panels was the risk of Cyber-Bullying or Cyber-Stalking.

In contrast, the student panel's rankings of the relative significance of social media risk factors did not coalesce as strongly as did the human resource professionals. Kendall's W for undergraduate student group was 0.562, indicative of moderate consensus in the relative rankings of the risk factors. More telling is the item rankings from this panel. The top ranked risk for this group was “Online Content May Be Used for Identity Theft”, an item that was ranked as fourth by the less experienced human resource panel and eighth by the more experienced human resource panel. Damage to personal reputation, which occupied the top of the list for the human resource professionals, was ranked as fourth in the list by undergraduate students. Finally, “Personal Views Perceived as Sanctioned/Approved by Employer” was not on the undergraduate student list. Table 1 below presents the results of the HR panels and a reproduction of the Rivera et al. (2015) panel results.



Rank	Rivera et al. (2015)	Current Study – Final Rankings	
	Undergraduates	Under 5 Yr. PHR	Over 5 Yr. PHR
1	Online content may be used for identity theft	Damage to Personal Reputation	Unintended Exposure of Information
2	Hacks / unauthorized access to social media account	Unintended Exposure of Information	Damage to Personal Reputation
3	Source of information for hackers/social engineering	Hacks/ Unauthorized Access to Social Media Account	Decreased Productivity
4	Damage to reputation	Online Content May Be Used for Identity Theft	Malicious Software/ Malware
5	Cyber-stalking	Online Content May Facilitate Discriminatory Hiring Practices	Personal Views Perceived as Sanctioned/ Approved by Employer
6	Unintended exposure of information	Personal Views Perceived as Sanctioned/ Approved by Employer	Source of Information for Hackers/ Social Engineering
7	Online content may facilitate discriminatory hiring practices	Online Content Shared with Unintended 3rd Party for Non-Commercial Purposes	Online Content May Facilitate Discriminatory Hiring Practices
8	Cyber-bullying	Decreased Personal Productivity	Online Content May Be Used for Identity Theft
9	Malicious software/malware	Intentional or Unintentional Violation of Legal or Regulatory Requirements	Convergence of Personal & Professional Networks
10	Online content shared with unintended third parties for commercial purposes	Online Content May Be Stored or Indexed	Online Content Shared with Unintended 3rd Party for Non-Commercial Purposes
11	Online content may be stored or indexed	Damage to Morale	Cyber-Bullying
12		Online Content Shared with Unintended 3rd for Commercial Purposes	Intentional or Unintentional Violation of Legal or Regulatory Requirements
13		Cyber-Bullying	Online Content Shared with Unintended 3rd Party for Commercial Purposes
14			Cyber-Stalking

**Table 1: Comparison of HR Panel Delphi Results with Rivera et al. (2015)**

## **DISCUSSION**

The panel results from the HR professionals and undergraduate students show several similarities but also reveal key differences in their outlooks regarding the risks of using social media. Undergraduate students appear to focus on the immediate personal risks they perceived, while human resource professionals tend to view social media risks in terms of personal and business reputation impacts. This difference in focus implies that students have not developed a clear perception of the career risks involved in social media participation.

Both students and human resource professionals ranked “Online Content may Facilitate Discriminatory Hiring Practices” towards the middle of their lists. This suggests that while neither group seemed to be overly concerned about this risk, reviewing hiring practices carefully in the future is worthy of consideration. Also, “Cyber-bullying” and/or “Cyber-Stalking” did not seem to be a major concern to either group, as it was at or near the bottom of all lists. There was also general agreement in ranking “Online Content Shared with Unintended Third Parties for Commercial Purposes” at or near the bottom of each list.

Several moderate differences in opinions may be a result of generational differences. For example, “Hacks/Unauthorized access to Social Media Account”, the second ranked risk by undergraduate students; was third on the list for human resources professionals with less than five years’ experience, and not on the list at all for more experienced human resource professionals. This may point to the more experienced human resource professional’s relative lack of familiarity with social media.

Striking differences do occur in the top ranked items between panels. First, “Online Content may be used for Identity Theft”, the top ranked risk for undergraduate students was ranked fourth and eighth by human resource professionals. Second, undergraduate students ranked “Damage to Reputation” as fourth on their list, while human resource professionals ranked it at the top of their list. Third, “Unintended Exposure of Information”, ranked as the sixth item by undergraduate students, was at the top of the list for human resource professionals.

Viewed in total, there is a considerable variance in the top ranked risks as perceived by undergraduate students and human resource professionals. As mentioned earlier, it appears that undergraduate students are more concerned about their personal experience with social media, rather than future career implications. In essence, students focus more on the immediate consequences of social media usage, and are less adept at understanding the long-term career implications of engaging on these platforms. Generally speaking, the concerns of students are more about personal damage and risk. Human resource professionals, however, seem to view these risks in terms of business and personal reputation. Given the range of issues that human resource professionals must address, including risk management,

reduction and mitigation, their focus is more on the organizational level and personal reputation, as opposed to personal damage and losses, damages that can be linked to identity theft and the like.

These differences are understandable given the career stage of each group. Many traditional students have little work experience, and what limited work experience they do have is likely an entry-level position. At this stage in their career, it is improbable that they have sufficient work responsibilities to necessitate attending to the reputational concerns of the enterprise. Human resource professionals, on the other hand, are focused on the organization's perspective. They are tasked with hiring employees who will help the organization perform at higher levels, as well as compliance, workforce development, retention and other issues. Consequently, it is no surprise that the two groups approach social media from different perspectives, examining the issues through different lenses.

## IMPLICATIONS

Given the differences in social media risk perceptions between students and hiring professionals, there is a need to educate students on the career consequences of their social media activity. For good or ill, once information is put on the internet it may be there in some form forever. It appears that student awareness of the career risks of using social media is relatively low. Thus, we believe that educators should devote sufficient time to raising awareness on these concerns.

Students should be informed of the extent to which employers are increasingly examining job applicant social media participation as part of the employee selection process. While some employers are more forthcoming (e.g. requesting social media passwords), students should realize that employers may screen prospective job candidates without the candidate's awareness (Landers & Schmidt, 2016). This means that students should understand their public profiles are under scrutiny at nearly all times and should act accordingly.

Our study demonstrates that students underestimate the damage that ill-advised social media participation may do to their post-college career prospect. Several of these risks may be more obvious, for example social media profiles or postings that include excessive profanity, lewdness or pornographic content, and alcohol or drug abuse (Grasz, 2016; Peluchette & Karl, 2008; Wade & Roth, 2015). Some less obvious behaviors include using social media as an outlet to vent their frustrations on current employers, co-workers or other job-related stressors (Grasz, 2016).

What is less obvious is that content matters - even more positive postings such as messages of support on social media can be potential landmines due to the sensitivity of a particular topic, e.g. gun control, abortion rights, political leanings or affiliations (Wade & Roth, 2015). Furthermore, individuals commonly mistake their social media postings to be protected by the First Amendment (O'Connor & Schmidt, 2015) and may be surprised to find that their posts are held against them.

Therefore, it is important to stress what legal rights and protections regarding social media usage exist (O'Connor & Schmidt, 2015).

Our findings suggest that we should educate our students in how their social media use reflects on organizational citizenship. For better or worse, one's work affiliation, especially if posted publicly in a social media profile, becomes part of an individual's online identity. Students should be mindful that this mixed identity means that their personal posts partly reflect on their organization post-employment. It is important that we as educators, help facilitate the awareness that HR professionals expect that self-identity should become shared-identity over time. A useful mechanism for raising student awareness may be to require students to do a self-study of their social media presence, as viewed through the lens of a prospective employer.

All three panels suggested that there was some potential for online content to facilitate discriminatory hiring practices. In fact, the potential for social media having a biasing effect, both unintentional and intentional, has been pointed out by other researchers (Sameen & Cornelius, 2015) (Wade & Roth, 2015). Perhaps, reframing these potential biases might be of use. For example, Social Identity Theory, Relational Demography Theory, and the Similarity-Attraction Paradigm can all explain how managers interpret social media cues when making hiring decisions (Wade & Roth, 2015). While some educators might object to this line of thought as "teaching students politics", teaching students impression management skills and how these relate to their social media use is important because of the extent to which organizations hire for reasons such as communication skills and organizational fit (Sameen & Cornelius, 2015).

For students pursuing a career in cybersecurity this may take on even greater importance. Organizations seeking to hire applicants into cybersecurity positions typically have high expectations regarding the trustworthiness and reputation of job candidates, expectations that can be dashed through ill-advised social media participation. This also extends to some of the cybersecurity certifications that professionals may seek. Altogether, we should endeavor to raise awareness among students of these risks.

The question then, is how to approach this. As proposed by Rivera et al. (2015), we believe that students should be made aware of the risks inherent in social media early on in their academic career. The results presented here buttress this argument. Human resource professionals, who are on the front lines of hiring job applicants, have a very different perspective on the risks of using social media. Making students aware of this perspective, and how it affects their career prospects should be part of our pedagogical efforts. One potentially interesting way that raises student awareness, fosters debate and increases interest, while providing learning points is to use a case-based method (O'Connor & Schmidt, 2015).

For students in the cybersecurity area, social engineering is already a topic that they have to examine. Certainly, social media and its inherent risks should form a part of this. In covering this topic, special emphasis should be placed on the types of information, which can be gleaned from social media. In addition to learning about the types of information found in social media, identifying its impact on career prospects is important. Beyond thinking of social media as a mechanism that hackers may use to collect information for nefarious purposes, students should be aware that it might also be used as a screening tool for job candidates. Again, engaging in a self-study exercise may be helpful in this situation. Not only can students evaluate their own social media presence in relation to future employment, but they can also evaluate what information they may be providing for someone who might engage in a social engineering type attack.

## LIMITATIONS

As with any study of this type, there are inherent limitations. Although the sample was selected to be representative of the populations mentioned, sample sizes are small, and may in the end not be entirely representative of the intended population. The purpose of the study was to offer a glimpse of how human resource professionals view social media risks, but by its nature is not moored on a theoretical framework. Although we made efforts to identify the types of risks that the Delphi panelists would perceive, the literature researched may not identify all of them. Finally, social media and the human resource area continues to evolve, thus limiting the long-term applicability of any recommendations.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the social media risks perceived by human resource professionals, and compared those to undergraduate student perceptions. The Delphi method was used to rank the identified risks. The results indicate that students viewed social media risks from an individual perspective such as risks to identity theft and hacking attacks. In contrast, human resource professionals viewed social media risks from a career and business perspective, putting more importance on the reputational aspects of social media. This contrast in views leads to a recommendation that greater pedagogical efforts be devoted to raising student awareness of the risks to career prospects involved in using social media.

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