

Screening Job Candidates with Social Media: A Manipulation of Disclosure Requests

Full Paper

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Abstract

In an attempt to find better employee organization fit, recruiters have turned to screening job candidates in part by reviewing their social media accounts. Job candidates may view these practices in a variety of ways, depending on the type of access requested and the individual characteristics of the job candidate. In this study, we measured changes in trust in the employer based on three increasingly intrusive disclosure requests and four individual characteristics. Findings from 162 participants suggest that a request for social media account logins reduces the trust in the employer, whereas collectivism, perceived privacy protection competence, and social media production increases trust in the employer. These findings have important implications for privacy research and for human resource screening practices.

Keywords

Social media, human resource, privacy, trust, culture

Introduction

The use of social networking sites (SNS), which facilitate web-content creation by non-technical users has been growing substantially over the past decade (Dewan and Ramaprasad 2014; Wu 2013). Of SNS, Aral et al. (2013, p. 3) contend “They represent one of the most transformative impacts of information technology on business, both within and outside firm boundaries.”

According to the Bureau of National Affairs (2000), the recruiting, selection and placing of new employees have been rated as the top three priorities of Human Resource (HR) professionals for over 15 years. Recruiters are faced with a complex search and optimization problem under uncertainty: they must attempt to match the skill sets of job candidates with the skill needs of their organization, while constrained by their ability to attract candidates given their financial resources and under uncertainty about the ability and motivation of the candidate to perform the activities which the organization needs to be performed.

While the recruiters are likely to have a strong sense of the requirements of the jobs which they are attempting to fill, the majority of the uncertainty that they likely face is in regard to the ability and motivation of each candidate. In the interest of securing offers, job candidates endeavor to present themselves in the most positive light possible, often times engaging in deception (Furner and George 2012; Weiss and Feldman 2006). Increasingly, recruiters are using the social media profiles and activities of candidates a means to reduce uncertainty about the candidates (Brown and Vaughn 2011). Through SNS, recruiters may be able to determine if an individual spends their free time studying or engaging in recreational behavior, as well the relative stability of their personal relationships, their use of drugs and alcohol as well as their proclivity to use language which might not reflect well on the company. Indeed, a few recent stories have indicated that recruiters have even gone so far as to request the SNS passwords of individuals applying for jobs (i.e. O'Dell 2012).

Job candidates are also faced with a complex optimization problem under uncertainty: they must attempt to elicit offers from multiple companies, then make tradeoffs between compensation, potential career growth opportunities and potential job satisfaction. Assessing potential career growth and satisfaction is wrought with uncertainty, and as such, job candidates must form attitudes about the employer based on

their limited interactions with recruiters and managers. In this scenario, trust becomes a factor of primary importance to the job candidate. It is the lack of understanding about the effect of recruiter use of SNS information about job candidates on the candidates trust in the employer which motivates our first research question.

RQ1: How does recruiter use of social media information influence job candidates trust in the employers?

Within HR research, most studies have focused on the effects of recruiter behavior on trust formation, with little attention given to the characteristics of the job candidate. Individuals differ in their proclivity to trust and in their expectations about privacy (Bélanger and Crossler 2011). We will argue that the SNS proficiency of a candidate and their reaction to recruiter SNS information seeking impacts trust in the company. Also, espoused national culture, and in particular uncertainty avoidance have been shown to influence trust in a number of contexts (e.g. Furner et al. 2014). Indeed Bélanger and Crossler (2011) suggest that privacy expectations are influenced by culture. This motivates our second research question:

RQ2: What individual and cultural characteristics influence job candidate trust in the employers?

The dynamics of privacy perceptions and trust formation as they relate to SNS are complex and increasingly relevant as more people use SNS to interact. In this study, we conduct a scenario-based experiment to explore one relevant context in which SNS privacy attitudes influence a very important decision for a number of people: whether or not they trust a potential employer. The study is organized as follows, relevant literature on social media privacy, trust in one's employer and espoused national culture is reviewed. Then, our research model is developed, followed by our methodology. Findings, implications and directions for future research are then discussed, and summarizing remarks conclude the paper.

Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

According to Kristof-Brown (2000), job candidate screening is conducted with the goal of maximizing both person-job fit (P-J fit) as well as person-organization fit (P-O fit). Assessing P-J fit involves matching the qualifications of job applications (their knowledge, skill and ability or KSA) with job requirements. Job requirements are furnished by hiring managers, while KSA qualifications are provided by candidates, largely from their resumes (Lauver and Kristof-Brown 2001). However, P-O fit is more difficult to assess, as it requires recruiters to make judgments about an individual's character and personality. Evaluating candidates in terms of personality and character is difficult, as substantial uncertainty exists. Indeed, assessing KSA involves some degree of uncertainty too, as research indicates that a large number of job candidates embellish or outright lie about their qualifications on their resumes and cover letters (Barrick et al. 2009; Levashina and Campion 2009). Indeed Levashina and Campion (2009) report that of the 5.8 million resumes examined by placement firm ADP, 41% had factual errors related to education, experience or credentials. Studies have even pointed to impression management during interviews (Chen et al. 2010). Overcoming this uncertainty to effectively evaluate P-J and P-O fit is a primary goal of recruiters.

Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) (Berger 1979) contends that when individuals are faced with a decision involving uncertainty (such as recruiters evaluating job candidates), they engage in either passive (observation) or active (information seeking) strategies to reduce uncertainty. HR researchers have identified a number of both passive and active uncertainty reduction strategies employed by recruiters (Ollington et al. 2013). With the proliferation of SNS, passive observation of several candidate characteristics which were previously difficult to assess is now possible. As Slovensky and Ross (2012) point out, individuals tend to use SNS for purposes other than seeking employment, and as such recruiters view SNS content as more "honest" and "valid" (p. 57) than resumes.

The content that candidates create using SNS may be useful for recruiters seeking to reduce uncertainty about the P-O fit of the candidate. For instance, some SNS users make public conversations and pictures related to excessive use of alcohol or even illegal drugs. Other users engage in arguments with significant others publically on SNS, which recruiters may view as an indication of instability and unreliability. Some SNS users use SNS to espouse political opinions which recruiters may fear will not reflect well on their company. Besides the red flags that SNS content may raise, information gleaned from SNS profiles can reinforce recruiters' positive evaluations of job candidates, for instance when a candidate comments on how hard they work and study, or indicate that they experience satisfaction when they accomplish a goal.

Recruiters are increasingly using SNS to screen candidates (Kluemper et al. 2012; Ollington et al. 2013), as doing so easier than the extensive personality tests previously employed by recruiters to assess P-O fit. Indeed even those personality tests can be “gamed” by candidates, who can respond in such a way as to make themselves appear to be a good fit (Ziegler et al. 2011). According to a 2009 survey by Careerbuilder.com, 45% of 2600 surveyed recruiters indicate that they use the SNS of candidates to reduce uncertainty about them (Grasz 2009). This compares to 22% in 2008. Indeed, Rowell (2010) finds that 70% of employers surveyed indicate that rejected a candidate because of his/her Facebook activities. While the publically available information contained in SNS is valuable, job candidates are becoming more aware of this, and are crafting their profiles to create a positive impression in recruiters (Dutta 2010). Job candidates have long engaged in impression management in their resumes and cover letters (Barrick et al. 2009), and savvy job candidates can use SNS as one more tool to augment their impression management efforts. One way that candidates can use SNS for impression management and still use them for their initial purpose is to control what recruiters see on SNS by restricting who can view the content of their profiles to those whom they identify as friends. For the recruiter, this mitigates the uncertainty reducing potential of SNS, as they are not privy to the full body of SNS content created by the candidate.

As recruiters become aware of candidate’s use of impression management via SNS (Slovensky and Ross 2012), some have begun to ask candidates to connect with them on social media (Smith and Kidder 2010), allowing the recruiters to see non-public content generated by the candidate and their connections. However, even if the candidate does connect with the recruiter, the candidate still has some degree of control over what content the recruiter sees. In order to overcome this hurdle, a few recruiters have turned to requesting that job candidates provide their SNS passwords in order to be considered for the position (O’Dell 2012). Should a candidate provide their SNS passwords, recruiters will have access to that candidate’s hidden group memberships, private posts, and personal message communications. This information would serve the interest of the recruiter very well, as it would be very effective at uncertainty reduction, however, many job candidates may view this degree of access as a potential invasion of privacy.

This study seeks to understand how a candidate’s construal of degree to which a recruiter violates their privacy will influence their trusting beliefs about that employer. Trust in the recruiter has been shown to influence job acceptance decisions in a number of other studies, and several employer, recruiter and situational factors have been shown to influence trusting beliefs. For example, Saks (1989) examines the influence of recruiter characteristics on job offer acceptance, and find that when recruiters give realistic job previews to the job candidates, candidates are more likely to accept the offer, even when the preview is less desirable. They note that this finding is consistent with Fisher et al. (1979), who attribute this effect to the candidates’ perception of the recruiter’s trustworthiness, knowledge and credibility (Fisher et al. found that recruiters who provide unfavorable written information about the job positively influences perceptions of trustworthiness). While a few authors have argued that recruiter trust can influence candidates’ offer selection (Celani et al. 2008), a number of studies have tied employer trust to a variety of employee outcomes, including motivation (Eskildsen and Dahlgaard 2000) performance (Dirks and Ferrin 2002), satisfaction and commitment (Dirks and Ferrin 2001) and knowledge sharing (Mooradian et al. 2006). This line of research makes it clear that facilitating trust in the employer as early as the interview process is not only in the interest of the recruiter, but in the interest of the organization as a whole.

Employer trustworthiness is not solely related to how forthcoming an employer is. A number of studies on the privacy perceptions of job candidates has indicated that job candidates tend to react negatively to requests for information from recruiters which is not related to the specific performance of the job they are applying to (i.e. P-J fit). For example, Mael et al. (1996) demonstrated that job candidates view questions regarding intimacy, religion, personal traumatic events and biodata as “invasive.” Indeed, researchers have long been concerned about the invasiveness of selection procedures (Duffy 1982). Indeed within the SNS context, a poll by the staffing firm Manpower found that 56% of job applications consider the use of SNS in hiring decisions unethical while 43% indicate that they would “feel outraged” if SNS were used in a hiring decision related to them personally (Anonymous 2007).

Based on studies linking recruiter intrusiveness and trust in the employer (e.g. Culnan and Armstrong 1999), we argue that candidates will foster stronger trusting beliefs when recruiters use less invasive social media screening.

H1: There will be a significant difference between the type of social media screening and candidate trust in the employer such that employers who scan public profile information will engender the most trust, followed by employers who ask to connect, followed by employers who ask for SNS passwords.

Further, we will argue that individual candidate characteristics will influence trust formation in the employer. Specifically, we believe that espoused collectivism, an individual level preference for social interaction and identity; espoused uncertainty avoidance, an individual level measure of risk propensity; privacy protection competence, an individual measure of others' ability to protect one's privacy and social media production, a measure of the extent to which an individual creates social media content, will influence trust formation.

Two of the four individual level constructs which comprise antecedents in our model are taken from Srite & Karahanna's (2006) conceptualization of espoused national culture. We use constructs from this framework not because we are predicting cross-national differences in trust formation, but because the constructs represent meaningful and effective predictors of our outcomes. This approach is consistent with other, non-international studies which make use of the constructs (e.g. Furner et al. 2014), and is consonant with Srite and Karahanna (2006), who argue that espoused culture should be measured at the individual level, not at any higher level order. In effect, this makes their espoused culture constructs individual difference variables suitable for the prediction of individual behavior (Furner and George 2012).

Collectivism refers to the extent to which individuals derive their identity from their associations with groups, be they family, community, national or organizational groups. Collectivists tend to present their achievements through the lens of what their team accomplished, seek gratification from their affiliations, and seek to build strong social bonds. This is in contrast to individualists, who derive their identity from their own characteristics, tend to highlight their individual accomplishments, and seek gratification from their independence and self-sufficiency. SNS are powerful tools for expressing both ones individualism, as well as for strengthening bonds and highlighting the power of one's affiliations. We contend that individuals who score highly in espoused collectivism will view employers' SNS access requests as relationship building opportunities, and as such will report higher levels of trust in the employer across all three levels of our experimental manipulation (SNS screening).

H2: Individuals who score higher on collectivism will report higher levels of trust in the employer.

Uncertainty avoidance refers to the extent to which individuals are comfortable acting in the absence of certainty about the outcome of their action. Also commonly referred to as risk aversion, it has been tied to a number of behavioral outcomes, including trust formation (Furner et al. 2014). Consistent with a number of studies which show a negative relationship between uncertainty avoidance and trust formation (e.g. Doney et al. 1998; Hwang and Lee 2012), we predict that individuals who score high on uncertainty avoidance will experience low feelings of trust in an employer.

H3: Individuals who score higher on uncertainty avoidance will report lower levels of trust in the employer.

Privacy Protection Competence (PPC) is based on Roger's (1975) protection motivation theory and is an assessment of how competent other individuals are at protecting their privacy. It is an adaptation of McKnight et al.'s (2002) competence based trusting disposition which has been developed to measure the privacy concerns of individuals in a number of online contexts (Grant 2005; Moscardelli and Divine 2007; Youn 2009).

Since individuals who score high on PPC believe that others have the ability to protect themselves from the harm associated with privacy disclosure, we predict that this confidence will cause them to experience greater trust in the employer. Individuals with low PPC perceptions will experience feelings vulnerability because they are not as confident in the employer's ability to protect the candidates' personal information from the potential harm associated with disclosure. As such, we predict:

H4: Individuals who score higher on Privacy Protection Competence will report higher levels of trust in employers.

Social Media Production (SMP) is a measure of the extent to which an individual creates new SNS content. It includes how frequently an individual blogs, comments on blogs, micro-blogs, participates in Wiki-based projects, answers questions in question and answer communities, shares content in SNS and updates SNS profiles.

Since more SMP increases the likelihood that an employer will find something which would hurt the candidate's chances of receiving an offer (such as a politically offensive post, an embarrassing picture, discussion of an unprofessional activity by friends, etc.), we predict that individuals who report more SMP will experience more anxiety when informed of each of the SNS screening activities, and as such, will report lower levels of trust in the employer.

H5: Individuals with more social media production will report lower levels of trust in employers.

Our research model appears in Figure 1. In the following section, we outline our methodology for testing our research model.

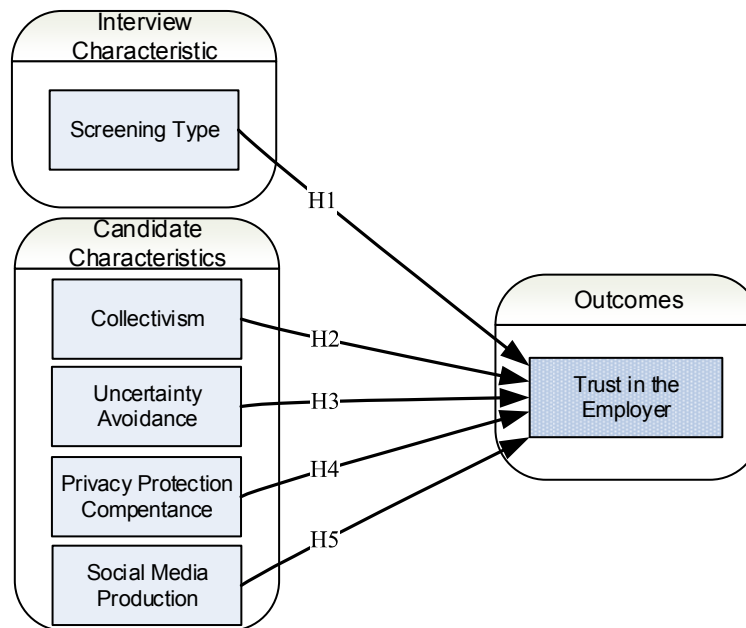


Figure 1: Research Model

Methodology

Instrument development

The questionnaire used in this study was developed from existing instruments which were adapted to a social media privacy context. The competence measure was adapted from competence based - trusting disposition (McKnight et al. 2002) on a 7 point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Trust in the employer was adapted from Sarker and others (Sarker et al. 2011). Espoused collectivism and espoused uncertainty avoidance were taken from Srite & Karahanna (2006) and employed a 5 point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Social media production consisted of 8 items asking about the creation of social media content on a 5 point scale from "Never" to "Very Often."

Research Design

All hypotheses were tested using an online questionnaire, administered through Qualtrics. Participants were solicited through email. Upper level undergraduate business majors and MBA students were selected as the target sample because they are heavy social media users (Duggan and Brenner 2013) and are likely to be on the job market. Students were offered extra credit for participation.

The survey started with a series of questions about the participants' espoused collectivism and uncertainty avoidance, social media usage, and trusting disposition. They were then randomly assigned to one of three vignettes. Each vignette asked the participant to pretend that they were interviewing for a job, and that the interviewer had informed them of their social media screening policy. The vignettes contained differing levels of social media screening. In the first vignette, the participants were informed that the interviewer would view the participants' public social media profiles. In the second vignette, the participants were asked to connect on the social media platforms so that the interviewer could view the profile in more detail. In the third vignette, the participants were asked to provide their username and password to the social media platform.

After being presented with the vignette, participants were asked how much they trusted the employer. Control variables include age, gender, education, and frequency of social media usage.

Sample

Undergraduate and graduate students at a major university in the southeastern United States were invited to participate. 170 participants started the survey with 162 usable responses.

Characteristic		Percentage
Age	18-25	51.9
	26-30	23.5
	31-35	7.4
	36-40	6.8
	41-50	9.3
	51+	1.2
Gender	Male	66
	Female	34
Education	Some Undergraduate Work	30.8
	Bachelors' Degree	19.8
	Some Graduate Work	42.6
	Masters' Degree	4.3
	Doctorate Degree	3.1
Social Media Intensity per week	0-5 hours	60.3
	6-10 hours	22.4
	11-15 hours	7.7
	16-20 hours	5.1
	20+ hours	4.5

Table 1. Demographics

Analysis and Results

In order to test our hypotheses, we first confirmed that our constructs were reliable. All constructs had a Cronbach's $\alpha \geq .70$. Table 2 summarizes the mean, standard deviation, Chronbach's α , and the correlation between constructs.

We tested our hypotheses using hierarchical regression (see table 3). In model 1, the control variables - social media usage intensity, gender, age, and level of education - were used to predict trust in the employer. Only age had a significant impact. In model 2, we added privacy protection competence, social media production, collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and the interview screening type. Hypothesis H1 was partially supported, with requests for SNS passwords significantly decreasing trust, but requests for connections having no significant impact on trust. Hypotheses H2 and H4 were both supported. Hypotheses H3, Uncertainty Avoidance's impact on trust in employer, was not supported. H5, social media production impact on trust, was significant but in the opposite direction than hypothesized.

	Mean	St. Dev.	α	1	2	3	4
1 Trust in Employer	4.1	1.0	.93				
2 Social Media production	2.1	.68	.78	.290*			
3 Collectivism	3.0	.57	.72	.207*	-.016		
4 Uncertainty avoidance	4.1	.54	.70	.010	.061	-.042	
5 Privacy Protection Competence	4.8	1.1	.80	.431*	.117	.028	.082

* Correlation significant at the 0.01 level

Table 2. Construct Descriptives, Reliability, and Correlations

Discussion

Job applicants' beliefs about a company are critical because they impact self-selection decisions and hence turnover rates, impact performance, and trigger anticipatory coping mechanisms (Cable et al. 2000). For companies looking to hire the best, brightest, and most dependable job applicants, recruiters need to establish and build trust between them and the company. Our findings suggest that the important factors that impact job applicant's trust in an employer are the applicant's perceptions that professionals are competent in general at protecting privacy, the amount of social media they produce, and their preferences for collectivism over individualism. Furthermore, requesting login information, decreases a job applicant's trust in an employer. This however was not true when connecting to the recruiter on a social networking site.

Contrary to our expectations, job applicants that were heavy producers of social media content tend to trust companies more. This discovery was a non-intuitive finding. On the one hand, heavy producers of content might be seen more sensitive to privacy concerns and hence more skeptical of trusting organizations. Yet, the findings suggest that this is not true. One explanation, based on information boundary theory, suggests that participants start producing and sharing content on social media because they have a wider set of boundaries for what and how often things are shared. Because they set their boundaries wider, they less often perceive a threat from other entities in breaking the privacy, leading to higher trusting levels in companies (Li 2012). Looking through the lens of social cognitive theory, an alternative explanation may be the job applicant's experiences with sharing social media content led to few bad outcomes, learning through observation that most people online are good, developing a privacy self-efficacy, and leading to greater trusting dispositions (Li 2012). Perhaps it is a combination of both.

Unsurprisingly, trust will be short circuited if the recruiter asks for social media logins. However, requesting to connect with the job applicant did not seem to impact the trust in the employer more than viewing the public profile of the social media account. This finding may be because connecting with a job applicant shows respect for their privacy, more so than asking for social media login credentials. Similar to e-commerce, greater perceptions of privacy risk leads to less trust (Dinev and Hart 2006). Requests to

connect on social media lack of impact on trust suggests that job candidates do not see the request as a meaningful difference in information disclosure from recruiters simply viewing the social media content.

	Model 1				Model 2			
	Beta	S.E.	t-value	p-value	Beta	S.E.	t-value	p-value
(Constant)	4.425	.481	9.202	.000	-1.129	.838	1.347	.180
Social Media Intensity	.052	.054	.975	.331	-.023	.051	-.459	.647
Gender	-.166	.168	-.990	.324	-.064	.146	-.439	.661
Age	-.264	.060	-4.386	.000	-.212	.053	-4.010	.000
Level of education	.052	.077	.680	.498	.136	.068	1.985	.049
Adjusted R ²	12.2%							
Request SM password					-.486	.164	-2.965	.004
Request SM connection					-.155	.163	-.948	.345
Collectivism					.325	.117	2.763	.006
Uncertainty avoidance					.041	.130	.315	.745
Competence					.328	.061	5.360	.000
Social media production					.351	.111	3.154	.002
Adjusted R ²					35.1%			

Table 3. Hierarchical regression on trust in employer

It is worth noting that while no studies indicate how common the practice is, the extent to which recruiters are asking for SNS passwords seems to be relatively limited. According to Gould et al. (2012) the popular press picked up on the trend after candidates who had applied to two employers (the city of Bozeman, MT and the Maryland Department of Corrections) went public about the request in 2009. In 2009, unemployment in the US was increasing and employers had a substantial degree of bargaining power. Since then, labor markets have recovered, and the potential of public backlash may discourage employers from engaging in the practice. Our findings suggest that while the practice might be effective in reducing uncertainty about the candidate, asking for SNS passwords is likely to result in costs related to trust and goodwill. Since reduced trust and enhanced risk to privacy violations affect the intention and actual disclosure of personal information (Zimmer et al. 2010), requesting social media login credentials may make the recruiters job harder. The request, rather than helping the recruiter learn more about the job candidate, may cause the job candidate to reveal less about themselves or implement various Internet privacy protective responses (Son and Kim 2008). Furthermore, the request itself is often considered immoral (Drake Forthcoming). Taken together, this implies that employers should avoid asking for SNS passwords except in hiring situations involving substantial security risks.

This study contributes to the emerging literature on employee attitudes about their privacy in the recruiting process. Our findings can be viewed as a direct response to Slovensky and Ross (2012, p. 62), who asked "... do applicants develop a negative impression of the interviewer as 'nosey' or voyeuristic?"

Future studies have the potential to further unravel the relationships between trust, privacy, disclosure, and risk perceptions surrounding social media usage of job candidates. Besides looking at various scenarios, researchers can add additional dimensions, such as perceptions of risk, job search intensity, or personality factors. They could also explore how usage of social media impacts perceptions of risk, trust, privacy, and disclosure of job applicants. This is particularly salient with younger job applicants who tend to be heavy social media producers and consumers.

Conclusion

In this study, we explored the relationship between social media usage and job applicant trust in an employer. Using a step-wise regression, we found that trust in an employer is significantly impacted by a job applicant's age, perceptions of collectivism, social media production, perceptions in competence of professionals, and requests for social media login credentials. This findings have important implications for human resource recruiters during job screening practices and for understanding job applicant social media usage and intentions.

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