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INVESTIGATING A METHOD TO MODIFY STUDENT SOCIAL MEDIA BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT

Empirically validated interventions designed to modify student social media behavior are lacking. The current study was undertaken to design and test the effectiveness of just such an intervention. Students, acting in the role of hiring managers, were asked to rank job candidates based on their resumes and social media profiles. The goal of the intervention was to get students to see how social media and posting behavior can negatively affect future employability. Through a better understanding of the relationship between social media and employability, it was hoped that students would modify their own posting behavior. Although the intervention was not found to be effective, the results of the quasi-experiment provide insights that can be used to develop and test future interventions. Of particular interest were the students' diverse and sometimes surprising assumptions about social media usage and how it may be evaluated in a professional context.

Keywords

Social media, students, hiring, online behavior

INTRODUCTION

Given that college students are some of the most prolific users of social media (Nielsen, 2012) and 93 percent of recruiters will review a candidate's social media profile before making an employment decision (Ceniza-Levine, 2014), a student's social media presence can have a significant impact on his/her future employability. Unfortunately, many students don't seem to take this situation as seriously as they should (Miller, Parson, & Lifer, 2010). Convincing students that they need to manage their social media presence has become an important part of preparing them for their careers. Given its importance, one would expect a great deal of research exploring ways in which instructors could help students shape their social media behavior. Yet, a review of the literature reveals surprisingly sparse research on potential methods of intervention. While the extant research might help shape such interventions, more research is needed on actual interventions and their results. In response to this gap, the current study undertakes a quasi-experiment to investigate the effectiveness of an intervention on student social media behavior.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of research shows that while students are aware of the potential risks and benefits of their social media presence on their professional careers, they may also have blind spots when it comes to how their posting behavior might be viewed from a professional standpoint. In a study by Root and McKay (2014), students were found to believe that employers may evaluate them based on social media posts about alcohol, drugs, and sex, along with posts using profanity and negative language. However, students did not consider friends' posts and photo tags to be a risk, nor did they view spelling and grammar to be a potential concern of employers. Such assumptions might prove detrimental to students and should inform the creation of an intervention.

Researchers have also found that risk-taking behavior on social media seems to be regulated by the perceived likelihood of harm rather than the expected severity of such harm, at least with regard to privacy concerns (Krasnova, Kolesnikova, & Guenther, 2009). If students underestimate the likelihood of harm, they may engage in risky social media behavior, even if the severity of potential consequences is clear. Additionally, privacy concerns and disclosure have been found not to be negatively correlated; these two concepts may be independent rather than forming two opposing ends of a see-saw (Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2009; McKnight, Lankton, & Tripp, 2011). An intervention developed from these

research findings might helping students have a more nuanced view of both the likelihood and potential damage of such harm.

The audience to which social media users are potentially writing has also been a focus of the extant literature. Shen and Cheung (2013) found that social media use is heavily influenced by collective efforts and interdependence, requiring researchers to consider social media peers as a crucial component of communication. Other studies have suggested that even though students may be aware of the potential audience of prospective employers and other authority figures, their behavior suggests that this audience is at best secondary to the audience of friends. Miller et al. (2010) identified a “posting paradox,” or a propensity for college students to engage in risk-taking posting behavior despite an awareness of its risks, and found that risk-taking posting behavior decreases the closer the students get to graduation. Follow-up studies confirmed the posting paradox domestically and internationally and on both Facebook and Twitter but did not always find time to graduation as significant (Melton, Miller, & Salmona, 2012; Miller, Salmona, & Melton, 2012). Rather, a model drawn from these studies showed, when tested, that time to graduation did not significantly influence the posting paradox but that a student's view of him- or herself did: for students who identified themselves as “on the job market,” the posting paradox dissolved, regardless of time to graduation or the age of the student (Miller et al., 2012). This finding suggests that perhaps the best way to prevent risk-taking posting behavior is to help students see that they are developing professionals and that their behavior is already occurring in a professional context.

In addition to studying students' awareness of and response to the potentially negative consequences of social media, researchers have also explored how students use social media to shape their professional image in a positive way. LinkedIn usage among college students is also lower than might be expected among prospective seekers of internships and jobs (Melton et al., 2012). Although this research did not ask in-depth questions or undertake a qualitative evaluation of students' social media profiles, we might surmise from these limited survey results that, in addition to students not being fully cognizant of the potential risks of their social media behavior, they might also not be aware of the opportunity costs of not using social media in a positive way to shape professional image.

Despite these developments in social media research, the feasibility and effectiveness of corresponding instructor-student interventions have not been explored empirically. If such interventions were to be undertaken, what would they look like? Any intervention would need to help students become aware of how they fit into the social media landscape. In other words, the intervention would need to help them move from seeing the professional risks and opportunities that others might incur in using social media to viewing their own risks and opportunities within this context. Ideally, the intervention would also be relatively brief, since typical academic courses do not have much time for additional material. Alternatively, an intervention would not necessarily add a large amount of additional content but would instead integrate with other course concepts.

Research questions might include the following:

- How effective is a brief intervention in changing students' social media behavior?
- What might the results suggest about how the intervention could be modified to make it more effective?

RESEARCH METHOD

In order to address the questions raised in the previous section, the authors decided to develop and test an intervention that could be used to modify student behaviors on social media sites. The intervention involved an in-class activity in which each student was asked to play the part of a hiring manager who had to rank three potential candidates for an internship. By playing this role, students would be made to view the hiring process from the other side and hopefully to envision their own prospective part as a job candidate.

The students were given a resume for each candidate along with a short summary of each candidate's social media profile, as prepared by the Human Resources department. The candidates were intentionally created with very similar educational qualifications and work histories. The only major distinguishing factor on the resumes was the candidates' GPAs. Candidate 2 had the highest overall GPA (3.35), followed by Candidate 3 (3.25) and Candidate 1 (3.00). While the candidates' resumes were very similar, their social media summaries were considerably more diverse. Candidate 1's summary included references to posts in his profile about excessive partying, along with occasional gender and racial slurs. Candidate 3's summary noted that he was an active social media user and that his posts mostly involved the organization that he was a member of and the activities that the organization promoted. Candidate 2's summary noted that he had no social media presence.

In order to test the effectiveness of the intervention, a survey was developed to be administered before and after the activity. This survey included questions to collect demographic data, as well as, data on student uses of social media sites and the content they post on these sites. Since the intervention was planned for the middle of the semester (eighth week), it was decided to administer the initial survey (pre-test) during the second week and the final survey (post-test) during the fifteenth week. Given that the intervention was in the early stages of development, the study sample was drawn from a single introductory business course offered to undergraduate students attending a large university in the Midwest United States. Based on the nature of the questions, the students were assured that, if they chose to participate, their responses would remain anonymous. A total of 38 usable responses were collected from the pre-test survey and 41 usable responses from the post-test survey. Fifty-five students completed the manipulation activity. The demographic breakdown of post-test survey respondents is given in Table 1.

Gender	n	%
Male	23	56.1%
Female	18	43.9%
Time to Graduation	n	%
Less than 1 year	3	7.3%
1 year	7	17.1%
2 years	21	51.2%
3 years	5	12.2%
4 years	3	7.3%
5 years	2	4.9%
More than 5 years	0	0.0%

Table 1. Gender and Time to Graduation

RESULTS

The results of the initial (pre-test) survey showed that students continue to be significant users of social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. The majority of students reported having a Facebook account for five or more years (82%); considered themselves to be familiar with Facebook (89.8%); and visited their accounts one or more times a day (58.9%). Most students reported having a Twitter account for two years or less (97.4%); considered themselves to be familiar with Twitter (87.2%); and visited their accounts one or more times a day (92.3%).

Having established that the study sample was both familiar with, and were active users of, social media sites, the students were then presented with the intervention activity in the eighth week of the semester. The results of the activity (Table 2) show that the majority of students ranked Candidate 3 first (78.2%), Candidate 2 second (72.2%), and Candidate 1 third (80.0%). Along with the ranking the candidates, the students were also asked to explain why they ranked the candidates as they did. The reasons provided were telling and occasionally unexpected. Examples of these reasons are discussed in the following section.

Candidate	First n (%)	Second n (%)	Third n (%)
1	5 (9.1%)	6 (11.1%)	44 (80.0%)
2	7 (12.7%)	39 (72.2%)	8 (14.5%)
3	43 (78.2%)	9 (16.7%)	3 (5.5%)

Table 2. Candidate ranking results

In order to assess the effectiveness of the intervention in modifying student social media behaviors, the final (post-test) survey was administered in the fifteenth week. The results of specific questions were then compared between the surveys to determine if any significant differences could be found. One such question asked students if they believed that employers should be able to view their social media content. The results presented in Table 3 show that the 26.3% of the respondents

answered 'No' in the pre-test, with 73.7% answering 'Yes'. By the post-test survey, the percentage of 'No' responses had decreased to 12.2% with the 'Yes' responses increasing to 87.8%. While the results appear to show movement in the positive direction, there was no statistically significant difference in the responses between the two surveys, $\chi^2(1, n = 79) = 2.556, p = .110$.

Do you believe potential employers should be able to view the contents of your social networking account(s)?	Pre-Test n (%)	Post-Test n (%)
No	10 (26.3%)	5 (12.2%)
Yes	28 (73.7%)	36 (87.8%)

Table 3. Employers should be able to view social networking content

The students were also asked if they would change the contents of their social media accounts if they knew a potential employer could view them. The results presented in Table 4 show that the 55.6% of the respondents answered 'No' in the pre-test, with 44.7% answering 'Yes'. By the post-test survey, the percentage of 'No' responses had increased to 61.0% with the 'Yes' responses decreasing to 39.0%. Again, the apparent movement in the responses was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, n = 79) = .265, p = .607$.

Would you change the contents of your social networking account(s) if you knew a potential employer could view them?	Pre-Test n (%)	Post-Test n (%)
No	21 (55.6%)	25 (61.0%)
Yes	17 (44.7%)	16 (39.0%)

Table 4. Would you change your social networking content

Finally, the students were asked about how comfortable they would be if different audiences viewed their Facebook and Twitter accounts. For each audience, the students responded on a seven point Likert-type scale anchored with "strongly disagree" (1) and "strongly agree" (7). Tables 5 and 6 give the pre-test and post-test mean scores for Facebook and Twitter by audience.

I would not mind if _____ saw the contents of my account	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Sig.
Friends	6.447	6.537	.642
Parents	6.263	6.171	.716
Boyfriend/Girlfriend's Parents	6.237	6.049	.476
Professors	5.868	5.805	.845
Potential Employers	5.789	5.707	.796

Table 5. Facebook Paired Samples T-Tests

I would not mind if _____ saw the contents of my account	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Sig.
Friends	6.579	6.390	.316
Parents	5.105	5.415	.389
Boyfriend/Girlfriend's Parents	5.105	5.171	.857
Professors	4.711	5.024	.441
Potential Employers	4.395	4.756	.395

Table 6. Twitter Paired Samples T-Tests

While the results Tables 5 and 6 make it clear that students are considerably less comfortable with potential employers viewing their accounts (both pre-test and post-test), there was no significant difference in the mean scores between surveys.

DISCUSSION

The results of the quasi-experiment proved the intervention to be less effective than hoped, with no statistical difference in students' responses in the pre- and post-tests. As a preliminary attempt, this is not necessarily a surprise. That said, it was not without value because the attempt may have also revealed design flaws that can be corrected in future interventions. First, it may be that the duration of the intervention, which was purposely designed to be quite brief to accommodate the already-full schedule in the typical college-level class, was simply too short to help students view themselves critically from the other side of the hiring process. In a related vein, the intervention may have been one step short of being complete. Although the students proved to be adept at evaluating hypothetical candidates for an internship, perhaps they had not been adequately prepared to make the jump to evaluating themselves critically in the context of hiring. The addition of a follow-up activity to the ranking of job candidates might add the missing link: after evaluating the hypothetical candidates, students could be asked to evaluate their own social media presence, either in class or as homework.

It may also be that the researchers (and the typical university instructor) are oblivious to the assumptions students make about social media usage, hindering the design of an effective intervention. Related to this last point, an unexpected yet useful product of the quasi-experiment can be drawn from students' written explanations for why they ranked each hypothetical candidate as they did, an articulation that actually resembles a required step in the hiring process of many organizations.

When reviewing these ranking explanations, the greatest divergence occurred in students' speculation about why Candidate 2 did not have a social media profile, along with other inferences about what online behavior suggests about a given candidate's offline behavior and potential work performance. Some students, albeit a minority, ranked Candidate 2 last. Some assumed that the lack of a social media profile meant the candidate, in the words of one student, "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 related concern was the risk that we "don't know anything about him." On the other hand, 72 percent of students ranked Candidate 2 as average, viewing the lack of social media as possibly negative but not disqualifying. One typical comment 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." Others, who most often 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."

Candidate 1, who had a negative social media profile, was, as expected, ranked last by a majority of students. Yet, the reasons for this ranking were diverse. Some respondents placed his social media activity in the context of customer service: would his evident frequent partying mean he would show up for work late? Others emphasized the risks for the company related to offensive gender- or race-related content, even if he wasn't the one who posted it. Others emphasized not his behavior but his lack of discretion; in other words, not being careful with how he was being portrayed in social media showed a lack of judgment or maturity that was of more concern than the activities themselves. And how would this lack of discretion translate into the professional world?: "Would he talk about a customer [on social media]?" A minority of respondents ranked Candidate 1 second, or even first. Some said that although his social media was "questionable," he had a good resume (even though, we would note, it was only slightly better than the other candidates). Other respondents apparently ignored the summary of Candidate 1's social media presence and evaluated him purely on his slightly better resume.

These ranking explanations provide a wealth of information about how students view the importance of social media presence and how they interpret social media content. Many of the explanations were surprising to the researchers which may help explain why the intervention was less than successful. Clearly, a better understanding of student thought processes is needed to develop an intervention that will be able to modify social media behavior. The explanations derived through the quasi-experiment provide a place to start. In addition to being used to develop a better intervention, the explanations can also be used as the subject of a class discussion to help develop critical thinking in students about how their social media presence might affect them professionally.

CONCLUSION

Although the quasi-experiment showed the intervention not to be effective in changing students' social media behavior, it can inform a redesigned intervention. The revised intervention should more explicitly connect students' evaluations in the role of hiring manager to their own social media presence. Students' explanations for their rankings provide a window into their assumptions that can be used in future efforts to help students think critically about their social media behavior.

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