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Abstract

Although a significant need exists for college students to market their job skills effectively to potential employers, no prior research systematically analyzed the quality of information included in college students' LinkedIn profiles. This study used a marketing framework to evaluate the effectiveness of information in LinkedIn profiles posted by current and former community college students. The mixed method study analyzed 340 publicly available LinkedIn profiles for students who reported attending 89 community colleges in the United States. The results suggest many college students may not understand how to use a LinkedIn profile to market their skills to potential employers. Key sections were often left blank and profiles failed to communicate students' unique value proposition. Content analysis revealed 75% of profiles contained an experience section with poor to below average descriptions. Comparative analysis found profiles for unemployed individuals and those seeking a new position were significantly worse than profiles for their employed counterparts. Additionally, LinkedIn profiles for students from large community colleges had significantly more writing errors than profiles for students attending medium-size community colleges. After discussing implications of the research, recommendations based on the study's results are suggested for career service staff, educators, and students.

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Approximately 92% of college students seek a degree in hopes of earning more money, with 89% attending to gain training for a future career (Milovanska-Farrington, 2020). Unfortunately, new college graduates often settle for lesser-paying positions that do not require a degree. Such underemployment is problematic. Research indicates initial underemployment after graduation sparks a cycle that may become a "permanent detour" (Taska et al., 2018, p. 7). According to Taska et al. (2018), about 40% of college students initially underemployed after graduation are five times more likely to remain underemployed years later. Underemployed workers also earn an average of $10,000 less each year than their counterparts with college-level positions (Taska et al., 2018). Such research suggests a significant need for college students to market their job skills to potential employers more effectively after graduation.

The growth of the Internet revolutionized the way college graduates search for jobs. Instead of sharing hard copies of resumes and attending face-to-face networking events, many job seekers now rely on online job boards, such as CareerBuilder, Indeed, and Monster (LaBombard, 2016). While such platforms are convenient, about 50% of online applications are never reviewed by a person; instead, talent-management software automatically removes job seekers who are not qualified for the position (Smith, 2013). With about 118 to 250 job seekers applying for a posted position (Smith, 2013), some recruiters only respond to about 20% to 30% of applicants (Biro, 2020; Smith, 2013).

New job seekers frequently fail to realize the importance of networking to identify potential work opportunities. Employment experts suggest there is no substitute for interacting with people directly when searching for a job (Chacon, 2015; Kaufman, 2011; Mihalick, 2019). About 80% of professionals believe networking is important to career success, with 70% of

people hired in 2016 reporting they had a LinkedIn connection with the company (LinkedIn Corporate Communications, 2017). Augustine (2020) similarly reported applicants with the right employee referral were 10 times more likely to be hired. These findings suggest new graduates limit their potential employment opportunities when they fail to network effectively.

About 95% of recruiters indicate they use LinkedIn when searching for potential employees (Aslam, 2020; Fertig, 2017). The widely recognized professional networking website has approximately 722 million members in over 200 countries worldwide, with over 40 million jobs posted (LinkedIn, 2020). Approximately 46 million LinkedIn users are college students or new graduates (Tran, 2020). To align with this trend, several colleges provide resources to help faculty members and students learn to use the professional networking platform (e.g., LinkedIn Higher Education, 2021; Saddleback College, 2020; York College, 2020).

While many researchers have investigated the social media platform (Aguado et al., 2019; Smith & Watkins, 2020; Zide et al. 2014), only a few have analyzed the LinkedIn profiles of college students (McCorkle & McCorkle, 2012; Peterson & Dover, 2014; Sloan & Gaffney, 2016). Despite being required to build a LinkedIn profile, undergraduate college students in Sloan and Gaffney's (2016) study frequently left out essential information in their profiles. In addition to requiring them to complete a profile, Peterson and Dover (2014) asked college students to make new connections, join LinkedIn groups, post comments/questions, and secure a letter of recommendation. McCorkle and McCorkle (2012) described using a LinkedIn teaching intervention based on marketing principles to help students promote themselves to potential employers. Before developing content for their LinkedIn profiles, college students in the study were required to conduct a personal SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis to help them identify their personal brand (McCorkle & McCorkle, 2012). While

providing anecdotal insight about some college students' ability to market themselves on LinkedIn, no prior research systematically analyzed the quality of college students' profiles. Because new graduates must persuasively market themselves to potential employers, the current study used a marketing framework to investigate how effectively current and former college students promote themselves in a LinkedIn profile.

Marketing Framework

Often perceived as advertising or promotion, marketing is much more. The discipline focuses on maximizing exchange between two parties (Bagozzi, 1975) in a variety of situations (e.g., retail purchases, non-profit donations, barter, and voting). Just as job seekers market their skills to potential employers (e.g., resumes, social media, networking, and personal interviews), organizations similarly market career opportunities to talented individuals.

When developing a marketing strategy, businesses typically consider the 4 Ps: product, place, price, and promotion (Kerin & Hartley, 2020; Marshall & Johnson, 2019; Singh, 2012). To work effectively, the 4 Ps must be combined to facilitate an exchange between two or more parties. For instance, a product is unlikely to succeed if no one can find it (place), never hears about it (promotion), or the cost is too high (price). These elements, however, do not work in isolation. Once their marketing mix is determined, organizations use the 4 Ps to then *position* the business against the competition. Because they often lack marketing training, many job seekers struggle when trying to sell themselves to potential employers.

Product

The product element, which is central to the marketing mix, focuses on items or services exchanged between two parties (Kerin & Hartley, 2020; Marshall & Johnson, 2019; Marušić, 2019; Weber, 2012). Services also fall into the product element of the marketing mix. The

product/service is critical because it represents *what* is being sold (Weber, 2012). Effective marketers recognize consumers buy products and services because they have specific needs. To maximize their opportunity to be hired, new college graduates can follow the simple marketing principle to *sell people what they want*. If a company advertises for a bilingual (English and Spanish) sales representative with two years' experience, they expect job seekers to only apply if they have the required experience and are proficient in both languages. Unfortunately, this basic marketing principle is often overlooked by job seekers. They frequently apply for positions they are not qualified for (Weber, 2012) instead of focusing on whether they are a good match for the position.

Individuals, who are more interested in selling what they *have* rather than what the customer *wants*, tend to be disliked and ineffective (Borg, 2014; Martin, 2017). Nevertheless, some job seekers make the same marketing mistake. A common complaint of recruiters is that new college graduates, desperate for any work, apply for positions that do not align with their background or experience. Weber (2012) reported at least 50% of job applicants lack the required qualifications. In response, most companies now use an applicant tracking system (ATS) to sort job seekers. Human resource experts estimate 90% of large companies and 65% of midsize organizations use ATS software that automatically removes individuals who lack appropriate job experience (Weber, 2012).

Instead of trying to sell employers something they do not want, college students need to develop a clear product strategy. The first and most crucial step in this process is to consider professions in demand by employers (D'Amico et al., 2012; Ellis et al., 2014; Ghilani, 2008). Most colleges and universities currently offer career counseling services that provide guidance about high-demand degrees. In class or during career planning sessions, educators can also

introduce students to O*Net Online (2021), a publicly available database of employment-related information in the United States. The website allows job seekers to retrieve employment trends by job title; projected growth for specific occupations is also available. In addition to choosing an appropriate degree, college students may participate in real-world work activities while still enrolled in college. For instance, students can expand their on-the-job experience through internships, volunteering, and/or part-time employment related to their future career (Sigelman et al., 2018). Such activities strengthen the marketing mix's product element by providing real-world evidence of the job seeker's career-related experience.

While full-time and part-time college students may find it challenging to take advantage of such opportunities, they can also strengthen their marketing mix's product element by leveraging in-class assignments and work-study employment. They can work efficiently in class by selecting assignment topics/projects related to their future career. For example, when asked to write an essay about a contemporary issue in a freshman composition class, a student interested in a computer science career could analyze the effect of ransomware on organizations. Similarly, a pre-med student required to develop a project for a biology course might analyze 3D printing of organs for use in medical transplants. Such intentional planning of class papers/projects empowers students to simultaneously accomplish two goals: (a) demonstrate understanding of the course's learning objectives and (b) strengthen the product element (career-related knowledge, skills, and abilities) of their marketing mix. College students can also work efficiently by seeking work-study experiences in a department related to their career. For example, a student interested in a computer science career might pursue a work-study job within the information technology department. Likewise, a student interested in a counseling career could gain experience through work-study employment in a psychology department.

Place

   The place, or location, element of the marketing mix focuses on *where* products or services are distributed (Kerin & Hartley, 2020; Marshall & Johnson, 2019; Marušić, 2019; Weber, 2012). A convenient location often plays a significant role in purchase decisions. Effective distribution strategies conveniently place products/services where they are needed. When searching for employment, the place (location) element of the marketing mix focuses on *where* the job seeker is willing to work. Before graduation, college students can research which geographic areas have high demand for their knowledge, skills, and abilities. For instance, Iowa students at Kirkwood Community College were better prepared to apply for jobs in the eastern region of the state (Baird, 2011).

   Unfortunately, new college graduates rarely conduct due diligence when deciding where to place their services. Instead, many assume their knowledge, skills, and abilities are needed in their hometown (Berman, 2018). While some organizations pay to relocate a new employee, most companies prefer to hire locally whenever possible (Breaugh, 2009). To minimize the risk of having to move to secure employment, college graduates can use online resources to identify geographic areas with organizations that need their occupation. College career centers and faculty members who work with students can encourage them to use O*Net Online's (2021) interactive website, which allows job seekers to research demand for specific occupations by state. The Glassdoor Economic Research (2020) report also provides insight about demand for jobs in various metropolitan areas. Similarly, online job boards (e.g., Career Builder, Indeed, and Monster) allow job seekers to research demand for specific positions by location. By placing their product (knowledge, skills, and abilities) in high demand locations, job seekers are likely to have a better chance of finding appropriate employment.

Price

The marketing mix's price element represents the cost of the product or service (Kerin & Hartley, 2020; Marshall & Johnson, 2019; Marušić, 2019; Weber, 2012). While some people prefer low prices, others perceive discounted prices are a sign of low quality (Kerin & Hartley, 2020; Marshall & Johnson, 2019). Because the price element is a specific, quantifiable amount, consumers often believe this element of the marketing mix is objectively determined. However, studies indicate price is fluid and subjective (Monroe, 1973; Shamir, 1985).

A job seeker's price is a combination of financial compensation (e.g., hourly wages, salary, commissions) and benefits (e.g., health/life insurance, retirement, stock options). While college students may not consider their "price" (earning potential) when selecting a college degree, an alternative approach could be beneficial. Rather than waiting until they start interviewing, college students can proactively research average salary information for specific occupations *before* graduating. Doing so would provide valuable context when interviewing for jobs. Additionally, job seekers can consider the quality of their product (knowledge, skills, and abilities) and place (location) before determining their marketing mix's price element. For instance, applicants with minimal knowledge, skills, and abilities (product) who live in a city (place) with little demand for their skills are unlikely to receive a high salary (price). Conversely, job seekers are likely to be offered a better salary if they have extensive experience and are in a high demand area. To help them make informed price decisions, college graduates can use online resources (Glassdoor, 2020; Salary.com, 2020) to research average compensation information *before* searching for potential positions.

Promotion

Promotion, the most visible element of the marketing mix, communicates information about the product or service to generate interest. Common forms of promotion include advertising, personal selling, direct marketing, publicity, and sales promotion (Kerin & Hartley, 2020; Marshall & Johnson, 2019). Most job seekers use a combination of promotional strategies. New college graduates understand they need to develop a resume, which summarizes their prior job experience. Colleges also encourage job seekers to network by reaching out to organizations (either in-person or through LinkedIn). Similarly, applicants use personal selling during interviews with potential employers.

Unfortunately, new college graduates frequently lack the skill and motivation to promote themselves to potential employers (Sloan & Gaffney, 2016). Feeling uncomfortable in selling situations, job seekers often do not know how to promote themselves in a resume or during an interview (Burnison, 2020). Believing a resume is merely a list of their educational and work experience, new college graduates often miss the opportunity to persuasively communicate how they can help the organization. This is especially problematic when students rely on online job boards to identify work opportunities. If they fail to communicate their skills in an online job application, they never hear from the organization (Burnison, 2020).

Positioning

In addition to the 4 Ps, businesses must also consider how they are positioned, or compared, to their competition (D'Aveni, 2007; Marušić, 2019). A foremost authority on marketing, Seth Godin explained the concept of positioning in his bestselling book the *Purple Cow* (Godin, 2002). Unlike a common brown cow, a purple cow is remarkable; it clearly and distinctly stands out from the rest. In the context of marketing, Godin (2002) suggests companies positioned as a 'brown cow' lack a competitive advantage. In contrast, 'purple cow'

organizations communicate a unique value proposition, a clear and compelling statement about distinct benefits. For instance, Facebook is positioned as a convenient way to share information with family and friends online, while YouTube is positioned as a simple and free video sharing platform. Similarly, LinkedIn is positioned as the premiere professional networking platform for job seekers and employers.

Unfortunately, new college graduates often fail to consider how they are positioned against hundreds of other applicants for the same job (McCorkle & McCorkle, 2012). While they can describe their educational background and work experience, job seekers frequently do not persuasively articulate the value of their personal brand (Arruda, 2014). Because recruiters only spend about 6.25 seconds reviewing a resume (Adams, 2012), applicants must clearly and quickly communicate what makes them the best choice. Similarly, job seekers must be prepared to explain why they are superior to other applicants during interviews.

Purpose

Using a marketing framework, a mixed method study investigated how effectively current and former college students market themselves in a LinkedIn profile. Key questions associated with each part of the marketing mix (product, place, price, promotion, and positioning) were mapped to specific LinkedIn profile sections (see Table 1). Product information (the individual's knowledge, skills, and abilities) is primarily communicated in the *experience* section of the profile, while place (location) is listed in the profile's header. The job seeker's positioning (unique value proposition) is communicated in the *about* section, whereas promotion occurs throughout the LinkedIn profile. Because compensation expectations vary, price information is not typically included in a LinkedIn profile. The first phase of the study qualitatively content analyzed four key parts of a LinkedIn profile: photo, *about* section,

experience section, and writing quality. The second phase of the study quantitatively compared whether evaluations of LinkedIn profile effectiveness differed significantly by two variables: employment status and college size.

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Table 1

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Employment Status

LinkedIn profiles serve several purposes. Individuals currently employed with an organization commonly use the social media platform to stay connected with peers, share work-related content, and/or identify potential talent for their organizations (Smith & Watkins, 2020). In contrast, unemployed workers use the platform in hopes of securing a job (Smith & Watkins, 2020; Peterson & Dover, 2014; Sloan & Gaffney, 2016). Because they are actively seeking work, unemployed individuals, as well as those who are employed but seeking a new position, are likely to be more actively engaged in the development and maintenance of their LinkedIn profiles. The study's first hypothesis investigated whether profile content varied by employment status (unemployed, employed but seeking a new position, employed, and self-employed).

H_1 The overall mean scores of a LinkedIn profile's key information (*about* section,

experience section, and writing) will differ significantly by employment status.

College Size

Over 900 community colleges educate students in the United States (Duffin, 2020). While the average size of a U.S. community college is 4,542 (Community College Review, 2020), enrollment differs significantly. Public community colleges average about 6,619 students, while private colleges average about 958 (Community College Review, 2020). Community

colleges are typically categorized as small (less than 5,000), medium (5,000 to 15,000), and large (more than 15,000) based on student enrollment (CollegeData, 2020). While larger community colleges are likely to have more resources, they also have a greater number of students to serve. As a result, Hypothesis 2 investigated whether key LinkedIn profile content differed by community college size.

H_2 The overall mean scores of a LinkedIn profile's key information (*about* section,

experience section, and writing) will differ significantly by college size.

Method

Sample

Publicly available LinkedIn profiles for former and current community college students were the unit of analysis for the study. No interaction with human subjects occurred. Because the Institutional Review Board acknowledges de-identified publicly available data does not constitute human subjects research, IRB approval was not required (Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects, 2019; Office of the Vice President of Research, n.d.).

A list of all community colleges in the United States was accessed and stratified by school size (Community College Review, 2020). Every other school was chosen randomly to identify a sample of small, medium, and large community colleges. Every fifth LinkedIn profile for individuals who reported attending one of the randomly selected schools was included in the study. Sample selection continued until four profiles were identified for each community college (two employed and two unemployed current or former students). The small category was dropped due to an insufficient number of employed and unemployed profiles for analysis. The final sample included 340 LinkedIn profiles for current/former students from 89 community colleges in 34 states.

Instrumentation

Table 2 includes a summary of the variables, including operational descriptions that aided

in the coding of open-ended data. The photo variable was measured dichotomously (0 = no photo

of a person; 1 = photo of a person). The *about* and *experience* sections were rated on a 6-point

ordinal scale (0 = none; 1= poor; 2 = below average; 3 = average; 4 = good; 5 = excellent), while

writing was evaluated on a 4-point ordinal scale (1= major errors; 2 = some errors; 3 = minor

errors; 4 = no errors). Employment status was determined from information in the LinkedIn

profile (1= unemployed; 2 = employed but seeking a new job; 3 = employed; 4 = self-employed).

After the sample was selected, each LinkedIn profile was paired with college size data reported

in the literature (Community College Review, 2020).

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Table 2

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After participating in a training session, three coders with doctoral degrees independently

rated a small sample of LinkedIn profiles that were not included in the final sample. Evaluations

were compared and discussed to calibrate inter-rater reliability. After the training, each of the

coders rated 340 LinkedIn profiles. All the coders completed their evaluations in one month

during the summer of 2019. Cronbach's alphas for each profile variable (photos α = .95; *about*

section α = .93; *experience* section α = .80; writing α = .78) provided evidence of inter-rater

reliability (Miller & Lovler, 2020).

Results

Frequencies

Frequency analysis revealed trends in the LinkedIn profiles ($N = 340$). About 1 in 4 profiles ($n = 79$, 23%) did not include a photograph of a person. A generic gray LinkedIn icon represented users who did not upload a profile image. Some profiles contained non-photograph images, such as cartoons, symbols, or avatars. The type of photograph displayed in most LinkedIn profiles ($n = 261$, 77%) varied. Several profiles contained a passport-like photograph of a single individual, which is common in most LinkedIn profiles. Others included photographs with friends, parents, children, and/or pets. Numerous non-professional selfie-like photographs were uploaded, including ones taken in unprofessional locations (e.g., standing in a backyard or sitting in a car).

Approximately 1 in 3 LinkedIn profiles ($n = 106$, 31%) left the *about* section blank, included brief placeholder text (e.g., To be updated), or only attached a file. Of those profiles with an *about* section ($n = 231$), nearly 7 in 10 ($n = 157$, 68%) contained information rated as poor or below average. This content was frequently very brief, confusing, and/or contained inappropriate personal information. Only 2% ($n = 5$) of profiles with an *about* section effectively described a unique value proposition.

While a few profiles ($n = 14$, 4%) did not include an *experience* section, most ($n = 326$, 96%) contained at least some work information. However, 3 out of 4 of the profiles ($n = 243$, 75%) contained *experience* information rated as poor or below average. For instance, some profiles listed the individual's *experience* as "nothing," "unemployed," or "student." Other profiles only included dates and titles (e.g., registered nurse, sales representative, mechanic), without descriptions of specific responsibilities or accomplishments.

About 4 in 10 profiles ($n = 132$, 39%) contained several to major writing errors. For instance, one profile's *experience* section repeatedly listed the individual as a "strudent" [sic].

Another profile for a "Guest Services Specialist" indicated, "I offered advice I the best way to get somewhere in the city based on how much they [passengers] were willing to spend." Minor writing errors were present in 20% (*n* = 67) of the sample's LinkedIn profiles, with 41% (*n* = 141) containing no writing errors.

Descriptive Statistics

Before computing any descriptive statistics, each coder's evaluations for writing, as well as the *about* and *experience* sections, were summed across all three coders to compute overall scores. Table 3 lists descriptive statistics for each of the LinkedIn profile variables. The mean overall score for the *about* section was 6.74 (*SD* = 3.24), while the *experience* section averaged 5.74 (*SD* = 3.06). The mean overall writing score was 8.26 (*SD* = 2.72). All the variables were normally distributed and deemed appropriate for analysis with inferential statistics.

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Table 3

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 Comparative Analysis

Employment status. Analysis of variance evaluated whether the overall mean scores of LinkedIn profiles varied significantly by employment status. As shown in Table 4, the overall rating of the *experience* section (*F*(3, 334) = 1.45, *p* = .23) did not differ significantly by employment status. Scores of the *experience* sections tended to be the same regardless of whether the students were currently looking for work or were already employed. However, overall mean scores of the *about* section differed significantly by employment status (*F*(3, 232) = 2.69, *p* = .05). Profiles from self-employed individuals received the highest *about* section evaluations (*M* = 7.75, *SD* = 3.85), followed by workers who were employed (*M* = 7.31, *SD* =

3.36). Profiles for unemployed (*M* = 6.23, *SD* = 3.06) as well as employed individuals seeking a

new position (*M* = 5.73, *SD* = 2.61) received the lowest overall mean scores.

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Table 4

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A similar result was found with general writing (*F*(3, 336) = 8.74, *p* = .00). Profiles from

employed individuals received the highest overall writing evaluations (*M* = 9.03, *SD* = 2.44),

followed by profiles from employed individuals who were looking for a new job (*M* = 7.92, *SD* =

2.66) and unemployed (*M* = 7.63, *SD* = 2.80) individuals. Profiles from self-employed

individuals received the lowest writing evaluations (*M* = 6.70, *SD* = 2.79),

College size. T-tests compared overall mean scores of LinkedIn profiles based on the size

of the individual's college (medium or large). As shown in Table 5, no significant differences

were found in the overall mean scores of the *about* (*t*(234) = -1.65, *p* = .10) or *experience* (*t*(336)

= 1.01, *p* = .31) sections. However, data analysis detected a significant difference in the writing

quality of LinkedIn profiles based on the college's size (*t*(338) = 2.78, *p* = .01). Students from

large colleges had significantly lower writing scores (*M* = 8.02, *SD* = 2.71) than students from

medium size colleges (*M* = 8.93, *SD* = 2.64).

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Table 5

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Discussion

Implications

The study's findings strongly suggest many college students are not effectively marketing themselves in their LinkedIn profiles. Simple and widely known best practices, such as including a professional photograph, were not evident in 23% of the profiles analyzed in the study. While the current study's sample focused on the profiles of community college students, others on LinkedIn may make similar blunders. Prior research indicates the absence of a LinkedIn photo tends to leave recruiters with a negative impression of the job seeker (Chiang & Suen, 2015; Zide et al., 2014). Similarly, using selfie-like photos or images with pets, family, and/or friends may put college students at a disadvantage because they appear inexperienced and/or unprofessional when compared to other applicants. Consistent with other forms of marketing, recruiters frequently make snap judgments when reviewing information. As a result, a professional, passport-like photograph is likely to work best in a LinkedIn profile.

From a marketing perspective, the *about* section of a LinkedIn profile is essential because it communicates the job seeker's unique value proposition. Burnison (2020) argued one of the biggest mistakes people make in their LinkedIn profile is failing to sell themselves in the *about* section. Unfortunately, 1 in 3 of the profiles analyzed in the study did not include this section. The absence of this information suggests students may be at a loss about what to include. Of the profiles with an *about* section, most provided poor or below average information. The section often contained brief or vague (e.g., Becoming the best me I can become) descriptions as well as redundant summaries of information contained in the *experience* section. As a result, the *about* section of most profiles are unlikely to stand out in a competitive job market. This finding is especially problematic for unemployed students, who have the most immediate need to capture

potential employers' attention. To illustrate the importance of providing a clear, persuasive, and

unique value proposition, Table 6 compares generic brown cow phrasing with distinctive purple

cow descriptions. The table also includes a series of planning questions to help college students

reflect about what to include in the *about* section of a LinkedIn profile.

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Table 6

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Information in the *experience* section was also deficient. Data analysis found 75% of

profiles contained poor to below average work history descriptions. The way information was

presented in the profile often highlighted a lack of work experience. One profile indicated the

individual's occupation was "Unemployed," with the organization identified as "Home" and the

description "I attended school and took care of my children." Other sparse descriptions failed to

communicate the value of the individual's prior work experience. For instance, the profile for a

meat cutter only included the brief description "Keep up with the line and cut to specs."

A common problem in the *experience* section was a tendency to focus on work *activities*

rather than *benefits/accomplishments*. As shown in Table 6, generic descriptions of work

activities provide minimal insight about an individual's experience. Emphasizing benefits tends

to be more distinctive, persuasive, and compelling. Another problem observed in the *experience*

section of profiles related to the use of predictable phrasing, such as "responsible for,"

"managed," or "oversaw." Profiles that used strong action verbs in the *experience* section (e.g.,

"Built high performing teams," "Increased sales by 20%," "Launched a new product line")

received higher evaluations.

Table 6 includes questions college students can use when planning the *experience* section of their LinkedIn profiles. After recalling where they previously worked or volunteered, students can reflect about how their prior experiences relate to their desired career. For instance, a recent graduate with an associate degree in nursing may have no paid experience in healthcare. However, while attending college, she might have worked part-time at a retail store, volunteered at her church, and completed various clinical hours at a local hospital. In the *experience* section of her profile, the graduate could describe how she assisted in the development of a COVID-19 social distancing policy for her retail store to protect employees and customers during the pandemic. Similarly, she could explain how she regularly worked at the first aid station for large events hosted by her church. The new graduate could also describe how she helped with challenging cases when completing the clinical hours for her degree.

The quality of writing in the analyzed profiles varied. While several had few to no errors, about 4 in 10 of the profiles contained major writing mistakes. Additionally, writing in profiles for current and former students from large colleges received significantly lower evaluations than profiles from medium-size colleges. These findings are problematic because typographical errors, which are avoidable with careful proofreading, often communicate inattentiveness and/or laziness (Gannett, 2018; Hoover, 2013; McTavish, 2014; Wiens, 2012). Common spelling mistakes, such as "manger" instead of "manager," also make it difficult for recruiters to locate a student's profile in LinkedIn. Poor writing skills may have long-term consequences for the student's career. Research by Hoover (2013) found professionals with more writing errors in their LinkedIn profiles tended to be promoted less frequently.

Recommendations

Career service staff. Because most non-business students are unfamiliar with how to sell themselves to potential employers, career service staff could leverage existing college resources to help students with their LinkedIn profiles. For instance, they could encourage the development of collaborative workshops with teams composed of existing career counselors, photographers, marketing faculty, and writing instructors to provide students with well-balanced job search resources. While career counselors currently often provide guidance about high demand professions (the product element of a marketing mix), existing business faculty could train students about how to place, price, promote, and position their knowledge, skills, and abilities in the *about* and *experience* sections of their profiles. If such workshops were offered on campus with existing faculty and staff, the process could be affordable and sustainable.

Educators. The study's results also provide guidance for educators who work with students seeking employment. The study's preliminary findings were presented at the League of Innovation in the Community College conference (Daniels, 2020a) and featured in a national webinar hosted by the National Convergence Technology Center (CTC) at Collin College (Daniels, 2020b). Both sessions were highly attended. After the webinar, 80% of educators who responded to a survey after the session indicated they intended to incorporate the study's LinkedIn recommendations in their classrooms (Daniels & Dempsey, 2021).

When interacting with students, faculty members can emphasize a LinkedIn profile is much more than a digital version of a resume. The platform allows students to put their best foot forward so potential employers want to learn more. To help students avoid common LinkedIn blunders, faculty members can encourage students to review the 1-page handout in Figure 1, which summarizes profile best practices based on the study's findings. Instructors also can share

the examples and planning questions in Table 6 to help students understand how to position their descriptions persuasively. To strengthen their profile and professional networking skills further, faculty members can take online courses about the professional networking website (e.g., Call & Chow, 2017; Verdonck, 2017).

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Figure 1

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Students. The study's results suggest the process of determining what to include in a LinkedIn profile begins *before* graduation. Using a marketing framework, college students first identify what product (knowledge, skills, and abilities) they want to sell to potential employers, so they select appropriate degrees. They can then strengthen their marketing mix's product element by seeking internships, part-time work, and volunteer opportunities related to their desired career path (Sigelman et al., 2018). Additionally, the occupation's potential salary (price element) can be researched with online resources (Glassdoor, 2020; Salary.com, 2020) to ensure students have realistic expectations about future income. Thought should also be given to where students plan to place their services. Doing so will also help them identify specific organizations in their area to connect with once their LinkedIn profile is built.

It is essential for students to carefully consider how they will position themselves when searching for a job. Because online job boards make it easy for new graduates to apply, organizations frequently receive hundreds of applications. To standout, students must persuasively describe the knowledge, skills, and abilities they have that other applicants do not. To achieve this goal, job seekers can focus on benefits and accomplishments in their LinkedIn profiles provided to prior employers, rather than generic summaries of activities and tasks.

Students can use the examples and planning questions in Table 6, which are based on the study's findings, to identify their unique value proposition. They can also discuss the reflective questions in the table with their current employers, instructors, family, and friends to gather various perspectives. Once their market positioning is identified, graduates can use the 1-page handout in Figure 1 to avoid common LinkedIn blunders. Students can also take advantage of LinkedIn's courses about how to use the professional networking platform (Call & Chow, 2017; Gelwicks, 2020; Schinkten, 2020; Sutton, 2016; Verdonck, 2017).

Limitations & Future Research

The current study was limited to a random sample of publicly available LinkedIn profiles from current and former U.S. community college students. The findings may not apply to non-community college students or individuals outside the United States. The study was also limited to four aspects of LinkedIn profiles: photograph, *about* section, *experience* section, and general writing. No attempt was made to evaluate how frequently students were hired, interacted with other LinkedIn users, or shared non-profile content.

Future research can build on the findings of the current study by quantitatively testing the interventions suggested in the paper. For instance, a quasi-experimental design could compare a test group's LinkedIn profiles, which received one or more of the teaching interventions, with a control group. Similar studies could be conducted on any of the LinkedIn sponsored courses available through the professional networking platform. Because LinkedIn profiles contain subjective and open-ended information, studies with multiple coders would help ensure profiles are reliably assessed.

The study's finding that quality of writing in a LinkedIn profile varied significantly by college size also merits additional research. Because the current study's first hypothesis focused

on employment status, a stratified sampling technique identified two employed and two

unemployed students from 89 colleges. To better understand how college size may be associated

with LinkedIn writing quality, researchers could sample more students from fewer colleges (e.g.,

30 students from 10 colleges of different sizes). Future researchers could also collect data about

the type of writing support available at each of the colleges. Such information would help

administrators to understand how institutional writing support may be associated with student

employability.

Conclusion

This national study of LinkedIn profiles found most current and former college students

do not effectively market themselves to potential employers. Key sections were often left blank,

failed to communicate the student's unique value proposition, included poor to below average

descriptions, and/or contained major writing errors. Helping students select an appropriate

degree plan, which is common at most colleges and universities, is an important first step to

reduce the risk of underemployment after graduation. However, choosing a career path is only

one part of a larger job search strategy. To reduce the risk of underemployment, colleges can

better prepare their students by teaching them how to market themselves effectively.

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Table 1

Key Questions and LinkedIn Sections Associated with Marketing Mix Elements

Marketing Mix	Key Questions	LinkedIn Profile					Writing
		Header			Sections		
		Photo	Location	Connections	About	Experience	
Product	What knowledge, skills, and abilities do you have?					✓	
Place	Where are you located?		✓				
Price	How much do you want to be paid?						
Promotion	How will people learn more about you?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Positioning	What is your unique value proposition?				✓		

Table 2

Codebook for LinkedIn Profile Variables

Variable	Coding	Description
Photo	0 = None	No photo, clipart, or avatar
	1 = Photo	Photograph of the person represented in the profile
About section	0 = None	Nothing in the about section
		Placeholder text (e.g., To be updated)
		Only an attachment
	1 = Poor	Very brief
		Few (if any) details
	2 = Below average	Confusing or rambles
		Some details
	3 = Average	Predictable, cliché, or vague phrasing
		Some details
	4 = Good	Several details but wordy
		Unique value proposition was not evident
	5 = Excellent	Several details
		Fluent, clear, concise, professional
		Highlights a unique value proposition
Experience section	0 = None	Nothing in the experience section
	1 = Poor	All or most positions list only the title and/or date
		Little to no description of each position
	2 = Below average	Very brief descriptions
		Inconsistent descriptions (most very brief; a few good)
	3 = Average	Average descriptions; needed more details
		Inconsistent descriptions (most were good; some brief)
	4 = Good	Good descriptions with detailed info for most positions
		Predictable phrasing (e.g., Responsible for, oversaw, etc.)
	5 = Excellent	Excellent descriptions with details for every position
		Engaging phrasing
Writing	1 = Major errors	6+ errors
	2 = Some errors	3 to 5 errors
	3 = Minor errors	1 to 2 errors
	4 = No errors	Zero errors
Employment status	1 = Unemployed	Not currently employed
	2 = Employed but seeking	Currently employed but looking for a new job
	3 = Employed	Currently employed and not seeking a new job
	4 = Self-employed	Currently working for themselves
Community college size	1 = Small	Less than 5,000 students
	2 = Medium	5,000 to 15,000 students
	3 = Large	More than 15,000 students

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics of LinkedIn Profile Variables

Profile variable	*M*	*SD*	*Minimum*	*Maximum*	*Skew*
About section	6.74	3.24	1	14	0.25
Experience section	5.74	3.06	1	13	0.57
Writing	8.26	2.72	3	12	-0.23

Table 4

Analysis of Variance of LinkedIn Profile Variables by Employment Status

Profile variables	Employment status												F	p
	Unemployed			Employed but seeking			Employed			Self- employed				
	n	*M*	*SD*	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*n*	*M*	*SD*		
About section	112	6.23	3.06	11	5.73	2.61	105	7.31	3.36	8	7.75	3.85	2.69	.05
Experience section	158	5.46	2.71	13	5.00	2.42	157	6.10	3.39	10	5.60	3.47	1.45	0.23
Writing	159	7.63	2.80	13	7.92	2.66	158	9.03	2.44	10	6.70	2.79	8.74	.00

Table 5

Differences in LinkedIn Profile Variables by Community College Size

Profile variables	Medium			Large			*t*	*p*
	n	*M*	*SD*	*n*	*M*	*SD*		
About section	64	6.17	3.02	172	6.95	3.3	-1.65	.10
Experience section	90	6.02	2.99	248	5.64	3.09	1.01	.31
Writing	91	8.93	2.64	249	8.02	2.71	2.78	.01

Table 6

Positioning Examples and Planning Questions for Key Sections of a LinkedIn Profile

LinkedIn Section	Positioning Examples		Planning Questions
	Weak	**Strong**	
About	**Brown cow** No or bland value proposition	**Purple cow** Unique value proposition	• What skills (or combination of skills) do you have that other applicants do not? • When, in the past, were you the "go to" person to solve a problem that others could not fix? • What is the one thing you want potential employers to remember that makes you better than all the other applicants? • What evidence do you have to document information in the about section of your profile (e.g., performance evaluations, paystubs, awards, etc.)?
	For the last 10 years I worked as a sales representative for a manufacturing company.	Top performing sales representative with extensive experience selling products and services for manufacturing companies in the United States • Recognized as the leading salesperson from 2015 to 2020 for the southwest region of Company XYZ • Generated $250,000 in new product sales in 2020 • Earned an average customer satisfaction rating of 95% in 2020	
Experience	**Activity-focused** Generic description of responsibilities	**Benefit-focused** Specific description of accomplishments	• What organizations have you worked for or volunteered with in the past? • What major accomplishments *related to your desired career* did you achieve for each organization? How did each organization benefit by your contribution? • What evidence do you have to document the information in the experience section (e.g., letters of recommendation, performance evaluations, work product samples, class projects/papers, etc.)?
	Company ABC • Responsible for interacting with customers and answering telephone calls *Company XYZ* • Managed a sales team of 10 people • Oversaw monthly inventory process	*Company ABC* • Generated an average of $5,000 in sales each month • Increased enrollment in the company's loyalty program by 25% *Company XYZ* • Built a high performing team of 10 national sales representatives • Reduced shoplifting losses by 10% with a new inventory management system	

Use a Professional Photo
No selfies, kids, pets, clipart, clutter, or freaky photos!

Provide a Concise Headline
Don't list "Unemployed" or include personal information

Connect   🔒 Message   More...

Sally Smith

Assistant Director of Marketing

Describe What's Unique About You
What do you want people to remember about you?

About

Describe your unique value proposition in a professional, persuasive, and concise way.

Persuade Readers
Don't just describe your skills! Convince people your work is valuable. Get an internship or do volunteer work (if needed).

Experience

- Include concise, persuasive descriptions of your job experience.
- Use action verbs (e.g., "Built high performing teams," "Increased sales by 20%," "Launched new product line").
- Avoid predictable phrasing (e.g., "Responsible for," "Oversaw," or "Managed").

PROOFREAD!
Spelling and grammar mistakes communicate that your work is sloppy.

2021 - Dr. Ruby A. Daniels

Daniels, R. A. (2021). *LinkedIn blunder: Creative Commons license handout.* URL