

Running head: DIGITAL DIRT WORKSHOP AND UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

**The Effectiveness of a Career Services' Digital Dirt Workshop for  
Undergraduate Students**

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### Abstract

Undergraduate students use Facebook or Myspace to communicate with their peers on the internet. Some of these individuals do not realize that their future employers may have access to their Facebook or Myspace profiles. Any negative information these employers discover about their candidates is "Digital Dirt". The purpose of this study was to discover the effectiveness of a university-based career services' Digital Dirt workshop for undergraduate students. This study sought to determine if participants would have different survey responses after the Digital Dirt workshop intervention (post-test) than they had before the Digital Dirt workshop intervention (pre-test). The results of this study indicated that participants are more likely to remove pictures and personal information from their social networking profiles after participation in the Digital Dirt workshop than before attending the workshop.

### **The Effectiveness of a Career Services' Digital Dirt Workshop for Undergraduate Students**

A majority of today's undergraduate students represent the millennial generation (Nikirk, 2009). These students, born during a time period starting in the early 1980s and ending in the late 1990s (Vie, 2008), comprise a majority of America's college and university undergraduate population (Oblinger, 2003). This large group of undergraduate students consume their lives with communication technology to communicate with others (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Tapscott, 2008). One of the ways in which they communicate with peers is through social networking websites like Facebook or Myspace. These social networking websites are steadily attracting users. Facebook and Myspace, which are two of the largest social networking websites, each boasts over 250 million registered users (Stone, 2009).

Today's undergraduate students interact with others through social networking websites (i.e. - Facebook, Myspace, etc.). Through these websites, users disclose personal information and updates to friends and family. Although this information may contribute to closer interpersonal relationships (Peluchette & Karl, 2008), the information might cost some of today's undergraduate students a future employment opportunity (Veen, 2009). In this study, questionable content and other unflattering information is referred to as "Digital Dirt".

Undergraduate students have many reasons why they choose to interact with others on social networking websites. Half of today's undergraduate students use social networking websites to keep others informed of their daily lives (Wiley & Sission, 2006). Another recent survey indicated that undergraduate students (MIs) in the U.S. utilize social networking websites to socially interact with face-to-face acquaintances in order to maintain friendships rather than to make new friends (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007).

When interacting with others using social networking websites, undergraduate students often reveal personal information about themselves (Peluchette & Karl, 2008). Facebook enables users to reveal four types of personal information: basic information, personal information, contact information, and education/work information (Kim, Jeong, & Lee, 2009). This basic information includes the person's name, photos, age, birthday, relationship status, gender of interest, and type of relationship desired (friendship or dating). Personal information on the profile can include the person's interests, favorite music, television shows, books; and important quotes. Contact information may include the person's mobile phone number, home phone, and address. A Facebook user may also include their education and past/current work information, which may include the name of schools currently attending and/or previously attended (high school, undergraduate school, and graduate school). The user has the ability to reveal or conceal the information listed on their profile (Kim, Jeong, and Lee 2009). In addition, Facebook computes the information and uses the information to display potential friends that share the user's interests and/or life experiences.

Through social networking websites like Facebook and Myspace, employers are able to gain a glimpse into their current and future employee's personal lives. If a job candidate or current employee posts photos of themselves enjoying spring break weekend or a night club, the employer who discovers these photos may decide to use them in hiring or retention

decisions (Baker, 2009). Privacy concerns arise when an employer examines a job candidate's or current employee's social networking profiles.

Many Americans feel that their expectation of privacy is slowly becoming nonexistent (Hough, 2009). Westin (1967) described privacy as "the claim of individuals, groups, or institutions to determine for themselves, when, how and to what extent information about them is communicated to others" (p. 7). Flaherty (1967) extended the definition of privacy by presenting the four components of privacy: solitude, intimacy, anonymity, and reserve. He defines "reserve" as the implied discretion of others not to disclose certain information (relies on trust). The fourth component, reserve, seems to be the most salient privacy component when examining privacy on social networking websites. Hough (2009) indicates that the erosion of privacy may have a greater impact in the reserve category. This potential impact can be cross-applied to the workplace setting, in which employers have the ability to screen potential and current employees by examining their social networking profile(s).

Personal disclosure on social networking websites is not solely negative. Roberts and Roach (2009) indicated Facebook and other social networking websites such as Facebook enable individuals to maintain and strengthen social ties, which can be beneficial in both social and academic settings. In addition to maintaining and strengthening social ties, social networking websites enable users to search for new contacts and to make new business connections (DeSilets & Dickerson, 2009).

#### Theoretical Framework

In this study, the protection motivation theory (PMT) was used to identify if Digital Dirt workshop participants' responses on the survey differed before and after the Digital Dirt workshop. Introduced by Ronald W. Rogers, the protection motivation theory, has six components: "(a) perceived severity of the threatened event; (b) perceived vulnerability (or probability) of the threat; (c) perceived response efficacy of preventive measures; (d) perceived self-efficacy in using preventive measures; (e) rewards; and (f) response costs" (Lee, Larose, & Rifon, 2008, p. 446). The first component, "perceived severity of the threatened event" focuses on an individual's perception of the negative consequences of the threat. The second component, "perceived vulnerability (of probability) of the threat" focuses on the likelihood of the occurrence of the negative event. The third component, "perceived response efficacy of preventive measures", occurs when the individual examines whether or not their preventative measures will be effective in stopping the negative event. The fourth component, "perceived self-efficacy in-using preventive measures", involves an individual's perceptions of how effective their preventative measures will be in addressing the perceived threat. "Rewards", the fifth component, focuses on the beneficial aspects of the implementing the preventative measures which may stop the negative event from occurring. The final component, "response costs", focuses on the negative aspects of implementing the preventative measures which may stop the negative event from occurring.

Our study addresses "perceived severity of the threatened event" by exposing undergraduate students to a "Digital Dirt" presentation which highlights the importance of concealing personal information on the internet. The second component of the PMT, "perceived vulnerability (or probability) of the threat", was addressed by revealing statistics

related to the number of employers who actively search job candidates' social networking profiles. The third and fourth steps "perceived response efficacy of preventive measures" and "perceived self-efficacy in using preventive measures" were addressed by showing the audience several easy steps that will help them conceal or delete their personal information from social networking websites. The final two components "rewards" and "response costs" were addressed by informing the audience members about the benefits of having a profile that does not contain unflattering information and that the process does not require much of their time.

#### Purpose of the Study

This Digital Dirt workshop was developed by the career services department at a university in Texas as a result of the growing amount of articles focused on employers and their usage of social networking websites in the job search. Many of today's human resources professionals and recruiters review current and future employee's social networking profiles (Baker 2009; Hlavac & Easterly, 2008). In fact, a survey indicated 63% of employers who viewed potential employee's social networking profiles rejected candidates based on information available on the profile (Davis, 2006). Items that were commonly cited as questionable content ranged from drug usage and alcohol usage to provocative photographs (Hartley, 2008).

The purpose of this study was to discover the effectiveness of a university-based career services' Digital Dirt workshop for undergraduate students. Particularly, this Digital Dirt workshop focused on social networking websites (Facebook and Myspace) and undergraduate students.

#### Research Hypotheses

Will undergraduate students' views of social networking websites (Facebook and Myspace) and the job search differ before and after participation in the Digital Dirt Digital Dirt workshop?

##### *Research Hypotheses*

Ho1: There is no difference in undergraduate students' views about an employer's right to monitor applicants' Facebook and Myspace profiles before and after participation in the Digital Dirt workshop.

Ho2: There is no difference in undergraduate students' views about information deleted from Facebook and Myspace profiles before and after participation in the Digital Dirt workshop.

Ho3: There is no difference in undergraduate students' views about the impact of their Facebook and Myspace profiles on their chances of being hired before and after participation in the Digital Dirt workshop.

Ho4: There is no difference in undergraduate students' intention to edit their Facebook and Myspace profiles based on their future occupation before and after participation in the Digital Dirt workshop.

Ho5: There is no difference in undergraduate students' views about the ability to access information on private Facebook and Myspace profiles before and after participation in the Digital Dirt workshop.

Ho6: There is no difference in undergraduate students' views that their Facebook or Myspace profile would pass the "Grandma Test" before and after participation in the Digital Dirt workshop.

Each of these research hypotheses focus on a different component of the Protection motivation theory. The first component of the PMT is addressed by research hypotheses one and six. The second component of the PMT is addressed by research hypotheses one, two, and five. The third and fourth components of the PMT are addressed by research hypothesis four. The final two components of the PMT are addressed by research hypothesis three and four.

### **Participants**

The sample included 33 males and 39 females. A majority of the participants in the study had profiles on social networking websites. Eleven participants stated they had no social networking profile. Eleven participants stated they had a Facebook profile only. Ten participants stated they had a Myspace profile only. One student listed their profile as "other". Thirty-nine participants claimed to have both Facebook and Myspace profiles. Of those participants with social networking profiles, 29 stated that their profiles were private and 33 stated that their profiles were not private. Of those participants with social networking profiles, 25 stated that they had met all of their social network contacts face-to-face and 37 stated that they had not met all of their social network contacts face-to-face.

### **Method**

This study was conducted at a rural, public university in the southern United States with approximately 8,000 students. Seventy-two undergraduate students (MIs) participated in the Digital Dirt workshop. These students, who were enrolled in three speech communication courses, completed a survey before and after participation in the Digital Dirt workshop.

*Description of the Digital Dirt workshop.* Working with Career Services at an institution, the digital dirt workshop was developed after the personnel discovered that an increasing number of employers were using social networking websites to gain additional information about their potential job candidates. The purpose of this study was to discover the effectiveness of a university-based career services' Digital Dirt workshop for undergraduate students. Particularly, this Digital Dirt workshop focused on social networking websites (Facebook and Myspace) and undergraduate students. The workshop began with a definition of Digital Dirt. Next, the presentation showed that employers monitor candidates' social networking profiles and are displeased with inappropriate pictures, obscene language, group affiliations, and evidence of alcohol and/or drug use. In addition to PowerPoint slides, participants watched a video about student and employee perspectives on Digital Dirt.

The facilitator mentioned that participants must also monitor information that others post about them in addition to the information they post themselves. Individuals were advised to clean up their Digital Dirt by reviewing postings and their profile regularly, making changes as necessary, changing privacy settings to limit access, and using a limited profile for co-workers and supervisors. Individuals were shown how to change Facebook privacy settings. Individuals were also advised to consider whether their grandmother would approve of their social networking profile, a standard known as the "Grandma Test." Examples of online profile

cleaning services were provided. Individuals were advised to post and publish positive information about themselves – like web articles, newspaper articles, and school documents - that could be found using a search engine such as Google. Individuals were also introduced to social networking websites that could be used to improve their online reputation such as LinkedIn, Ryze, Jobster, and Simply Hired. The Digital Dirt workshop concluded by encouraging participants to use their social networking profiles to help them make a positive first impressions with employers. Overall, the workshop lasted 50 minutes.

#### *Data analysis.*

Survey data was entered in to an SPSS database and analyzed using paired samples statistics and a paired-samples t-test. An alpha of 0.05 was used to determine significance.

Before and after attending the Digital Dirt workshop, participants were asked to respond to the following statements using a scale from 1 to 5 (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree):

1. I believe that employers have the right to look at the Facebook/Myspace profiles of people they are interviewing.
2. When a picture or comment is deleted from Facebook/Myspace, it is erased from the internet.
3. Based on my profile, a potential employer would be likely to hire me.
4. Based on my future occupation, I plan to change at least one aspect of my Facebook/Myspace profile in the next few weeks.
5. Because my profile is set to private, I believe that no one can find out additional information about me.
6. If the “Grandma Test” was conducted on my profile, I would pass.

The Digital Dirt workshop participants were able to complete the questions on the survey within a 5-10 minute time frame. In addition, question four “Based on my future occupation, I plan to change at least one aspect of my Facebook/Myspace profile in the next few weeks” included an answer prompt which asked them “Which aspect?” The students were not given any information prior to completing this test. The “Grandma Test” requires people to think about how their grandmother would feel/react if they viewed their granddaughter’s/grandson’s social networking profile.

### Results

The pre-test and post-test data for the Digital Dirt workshop is presented in Table 1. This table presents the results of each of the six survey questions. As shown in Figure 1, the mean response to the employer’s right question was 3.2778 before workshop attendance and 3.6111 after workshop attendance. The mean response to the question about information deleted from profiles was 2.2917 before the workshop and 2.0417 after the workshop. The mean response to the question about the profile’s impact on one’s ability to gain employment was 3.2222 before workshop attendance and 3.1944 after workshop attendance. The mean response to the question about deleting information from profile because of one’s future occupation was 2.4444 before the workshop and 2.8194 after the workshop. The mean response to the question about the ability to find information on a private profile was 1.5417 before workshop participation and 1.6389 after workshop participation. The mean response to

the question assessing the student’s perception of whether their profile passes the “Grandma Test” – meaning their grandmother would approve of the information on the profile – was 3.0694 before the workshop and 3.1111 after the workshop.

Table 1. Paired Samples Statistics for Survey Questions

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Employers have the right to look at the Facebook/Myspace profiles of potential employees. (Pre-Workshop).	3.2778	72	1.35545	.15974
	Employers have the right to look at the Facebook/Myspace profiles of potential employees. (Post-Workshop).	3.6111	72	1.16951	.13783
Pair 2	Pictures on Social Networking Websites are Deleted Permanently. (Pre-Workshop)	2.2917	72	1.14372	.13479
	Pictures on Social Networking Websites are Deleted Permanently. (Post-Workshop)	2.0417	72	1.47694	.17406
Pair 3	Based on my profile, a potential employer would be likely to hire me. (Pre-Workshop)	3.2222	72	1.66338	.19603
	Based on my profile, a potential employer would be likely to hire me. (Post-Workshop)	3.1944	72	1.58015	.18622
Pair 4	I will change at least one aspect of my social networking profile within the next few weeks (Pre-Workshop)	2.4444	72	1.54636	.18224
	I will change at least one aspect of my social networking profile within the next few weeks (Post-Workshop)	2.8194	72	1.64725	.19413
Pair 5	Because my profile is set to private, I believe that no one can find out additional information about me. (Pre-Workshop)	1.5417	72	1.09978	.12961
	Because my profile is set to private, I believe that no one can find out additional information about me. (Post-Workshop)	1.6389	72	1.03876	.12242
Pair 6	If the “Grandma Test” was conducted on my profile, I would pass. (Pre-Workshop)	3.0694	72	1.71428	.20203
	If the “Grandma Test” was conducted on my profile, I would pass. (Post-Workshop)	3.1111	72	1.75672	.20703



Table 2 shows the results of a paired-samples t-test using the Digital Dirt survey data. With a p-value of 0.010, the null hypothesis that there is no difference in individuals’ views about an employer’s right to monitor applicants’ Facebook and Myspace profiles before and after participation in the Digital Dirt workshop must be rejected.

With a p-value of 0.164, the null hypothesis that there is no difference in individuals’ views about information deleted from Facebook and Myspace profiles before and after participation in the Digital Dirt workshop cannot be rejected. With a p-value of 0.807, the null hypothesis that there is no difference in individuals’ views about the impact of their Facebook and Myspace profiles on their chances of being hired before and after participation in the Digital Dirt workshop cannot be rejected. With a p-value of 0.010, the null hypothesis that there is no difference in individuals’ intention to edit their Facebook and Myspace profiles based on their future occupation before and after participation in the Digital Dirt workshop must be rejected. With a p-value of 0.446, the null hypothesis that there is no difference in individuals’ views about the ability to access information on private Facebook and Myspace profiles before and after participation in the Digital Dirt workshop cannot be rejected. With a p-value of 0.694, the null hypothesis that there is no difference in individuals’ views that their Facebook or Myspace profile would pass the “Grandma Test” before and after participation in the Digital Dirt workshop cannot be rejected.

Table 2. Paired Samples t-Test for Survey Questions

**Paired Samples Test**

		Paired Differences							
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	EmployersRight - EmployersRightB	-.33333	1.07468	.12665	-.58587	-.08080	-2.632	71	.010
Pair 2	Erased - ErasedB	.25000	1.50819	.17774	-.10441	.60441	1.407	71	.164
Pair 3	PotentialEmp – PotentialEmpB	.02778	.96374	.11358	-.19869	.25425	.245	71	.807
Pair 4	FutureOcc – FutureOccB	-.37500	1.20372	.14186	-.65786	-.09214	-2.643	71	.010
Pair 5	AdditionalInfo – AdditionalInfoB	-.09722	1.07677	.12690	-.35025	.15581	-.766	71	.446
Pair 6	GrandmaTest – GrandmaTestB	-.04167	.89502	.10548	-.25199	.16865	-.395	71	.694

Some students who indicated that they would change an aspect of their social networking profile mentioned a specific part of their profile they wanted to change. Most of these responses emerged in the pictures category (70.5%). Other responses, each representing 6%, emerged in the following categories: activities, privacy settings, negative information, quotes, and postings.

### Discussion

As shown in Table 2, a paired samples t-test revealed significant differences in participants' mean responses to pre-workshop and post-workshop questions pertaining to the employer's right to monitor social networking profiles of job candidates and the participants' intentions to change their social networking profile in the next few weeks. These responses addressed the six components of the PMT theory: "(a) perceived severity of the threatened event; (b) perceived vulnerability (or probability) of the threat; (c) perceived response efficacy of preventive measures; (d) perceived self-efficacy in using preventive measures; (e) rewards; and (f) response costs" (Lee, Larose, & Rifon, 2008, p. 446).

Each of our research hypotheses focuses on a different component of the Protection motivation theory. The first component of the PMT is addressed by research hypotheses one and six. The second component of the PMT is addressed by research hypotheses one, two, and five. The third and fourth components of the PMT are addressed by research hypothesis four. The final two components of the PMT are addressed by research hypothesis three and four. Each of the six components of the PMT were confirmed by at least one of the research hypotheses (one and four).

In addition, our study also addressed each of the six components of the PMT theory. Through our study, we addressed the first component of the PMT theory "perceived severity of the threatened event" by employing a "Digital Dirt" presentation which highlighted the importance of concealing personal information on the internet. The pre-test results indicated most of the participants did not know their future employers have the ability and the right to search their social networking profile. As a result, their social networking profiles might be perceived as threats to their future career goals. The second component of the PMT, "perceived vulnerability (or probability) of the threat", was addressed by revealing statistics related to the number of employers who actively search job candidates' social networking profiles. The third and fourth steps "perceived response efficacy of preventive measures" and "perceived self-efficacy in using preventive measures" were addressed by showing the audience several easy steps that will help them conceal or delete their personal information from social networking websites. The final two components "rewards" and "response costs" were addressed by informing the audience members about the benefits of having a profile that does not contain unflattering information and that the process does not require much of their time. The pre-test and post test results indicated that the participants wanted to change at least one aspect of their profile after attending the Digital Dirt workshop.

### Conclusions

Overall, this study provided a glimpse into the mindset of participants regarding their perceptions of social networking websites and their future job search. This study discovered significant differences in mean responses to pre-workshop and post-workshop questions pertaining to the employer's right to monitor social networking profiles of job candidates and the participants' intentions to change their social networking profile in the next few weeks.

This study was limited to participants enrolled in one of three communications classes at a rural, public university in the South. These results are consistent with another study which indicated undergraduate students have information on their social networking profiles that they would not want current or future employers to see (Peluchette & Karl, 2008).

Privacy settings are an important feature of social networking websites and these privacy settings are easy for a user to modify. Facebook, for example, has a user settings link that enables users to modify the privacy settings for their profile information (12 privacy settings), contact information (nine privacy settings), applications and web sites (one privacy setting, search (two privacy settings) (Collins, 2010). A user can remove their Facebook content from Google search results by choosing the following links: account, privacy settings, and search. In the search window, the user should deselect the "public search results" option.

In addition to Google search results and a user's privacy settings, their personal content (current and deleted) can be accessed through third-party websites. According to Bonneau, Anderson and Danezis (2009), a social networking website user's personal information can be accessed by third parties through illegal phishing practices (i.e. – a invitation to view a pseudo video and the website extracts personal information from Facebook), sub-network memberships (i.e. – logging on to a website by using Facebook information, and friend-of-friend data sharing (i.e. – websites can access a user's personal information through their friend's profile). The authors state that the greatest problem facing user privacy is the user's lack of understanding privacy settings available through the social networking website.

### Implications

As a result of this study, college and university career services centers may want to offer a Digital Dirt workshop for their students. After this workshop, it seemed that the most participants realized the potential impact that their social networking profile may have on their future job search. If more students were exposed to the Digital Dirt workshop, more students might potentially change their online behavior on social networking websites.

One may postulate employers and their human resource personnel expect their future employees to possess and uphold a certain set of morals and beliefs. As a result, digital citizenship in the form of media literacy in the workplace may be an important for undergraduate students. In fact, company recruiters are encouraging college and university career resource center personnel to train their students to present themselves positively on social networking websites.

### Recommendations for Further Research

To further document the relationship between Facebook and Myspace profiles and employment success (hiring), future studies should focus on a comparison of the views of student applicants and employers about Facebook and Myspace profiles. In addition, future researchers may want to compare the ability of students to gain employment after college, starting salary, or whether the student received their first, second, or third preferred job with participation in the Digital Dirt workshop.

As a direct result of this study, future researchers might want to expand the study to include a follow-up measure focused on whether or not the students actually changed certain aspects of their social networking website profiles. In this study, we focused on the students' intention to change their social networking profile, but we did not follow-up with the students to see if the students actually changed their profile (i.e. – deleted pictures, deleted comments, added positive quotes, etc.).

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