




## Article

# Checked and Approved? Human Resources Managers' Uses of Social Media for Cybervetting

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**Abstract:** Human resource (HR) professionals who assess job candidates may engage in cybervetting, the collection and analysis of applicants' personal information available on social network sites (SNS). This raises important questions about the privacy of job applicants. In this study, interviews were conducted with 24 HR professionals from profit and governmental organizations to examine how information found on SNS is used to screen job applicants. HR managers were found to check for possible mismatches between the online information and the experiences and competences claimed by candidates. Pictures of the job candidates' spare time activities, drinking behavior, and physical appearance are seen as very informative. Pictures posted by job candidates' connections are valued as more informative than those posted by the applicants themselves. Governmental organizations' HR managers differ from profit-sector professionals by the fact that political views may play a role for the former. Finally, some HR professionals do not collect personal information about job candidates through social media, since they aim to respect a clear distinction between private life and work. They do not want to be influenced by information that has no relation with candidates' qualifications. The study's implications for theory and practice are also discussed.

**Keywords:** cybervetting; privacy; social media; social network sites; human resources management



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## 1. Introduction

Social network sites (SNS) have permeated a growing number of individuals' lives. Indeed, almost one in three US adults is almost constantly online and eight in ten go online daily [1]. SNS revolve around constructing an online profile and sharing daily experiences, such as images, texts and videos. A great amount of SNS users' personal information may become publicly available over time. This online information can be accessed by potential employers who engage in cybervetting, performing online searches and screening of social media in search for information about job applicants in order to evaluate their suitability for a specific position [2,3].

During a selection process, information that is easily accessible online, such as content found on SNS profiles, can shed some light on a job applicant's personality, sociability and competences. This publicly available information can be pieced together by human resources (HR) professionals in their search for more background information of job candidates in order to assess the fit between the candidate and the organizational needs [2]. In other words, an HR professional can get to know different sides of candidates and make a first selection, before a face-to-face interview, by reviewing their publicly accessible personal information [4]. Based on this digital presence, inferences can be made about the applicant based on the verbal, non-verbal behavior, and other visual information that is found online [5]. A US study among employers found that a majority of them (70%) uses

SNS to screen job candidates [6]. Jobseekers themselves may feel ambivalent towards the practice. A study by Jacobson and Gruzdz [3] found that about almost half of the students that participated in their survey felt uncomfortable with the idea that their social media would be screened by potential employers. Job applicants' attitudes towards cybervetting may be culturally specific, as differences were found between India and the United States. However, there is no difference in attitudes towards the practice of cybervetting based on gender or the current employment status [7].

Although HR professionals use SNS for screening candidates, how digital media are used in the recruitment process is not yet entirely understood. Little is known about the reasons why specific personal data or pictures might influence HR professionals' decisions concerning a candidate. Therefore, the present study wants to address this gap in the literature by investigating the motives of HR managers to screen candidates online.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. The Challenges of E-Recruitment and Cybervetting

The recent economic downturns and the increased efforts by businesses to focus on their core activities in order to cut costs have led some companies to outsource their HR management activities. Others try to diminish costs invested in recruitment by using online tools throughout the several phases of the recruitment process [8]. A growing number of organizations are using SNS for promoting job opportunities and to reach out to potential candidates [9]. Moreover, HR professionals also use online tools to screen candidates. These rapid and free background checks can be used as a supplementary step in the selection process, before calling applicants or inviting them for an interview [10]. As individuals post personal information on their online profile pages, it offers businesses opportunities to scrutinize job applicants more closely. For instance, online information can be used to check the veracity of information that candidates provided on their resume [7,11,12]. It also allows recruiters to get a sense of who the candidates are and to make sense of the narrative that job seekers use to tell their story [11].

The screening of SNS profiles offers access to several types of information that were unavailable or difficult to find in the past, such as a candidate's physical appearance, hobbies, opinions on current events. How individuals present themselves online in words and pictures offers HR professionals a broader perspective on an applicant's personality. As SNS contacts also post pictures of others online, formulate comments on other users' content and tag individuals in pictures, a lot of information may become available outside of the candidate's direct control [10]. Besides, individuals' personality and interpersonal skills become apparent through their online interactions. In fact, employers mention they screen job candidates' SNS profile to draw conclusions concerning an applicant's personality [6].

However, is information posted on SNS valuable to make inferences about a candidate? Although some might assume that SNS profiles offer an insight in the idealized selves of their creators, research found that SNS profiles are most often an extension of the real-life selves of the profile owners [13,14]. More particularly, selfies posted on SNS were found to reliably express some personality traits of the depicted person (i.e., agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness) [15]. Furthermore, research found that recruiters can reliably determine productivity-related traits of job applicants, based on the information found on SNS [16]. This finding, however, contrasts with another study that found that individuals' rating of participants' suitability for the job based on Facebook information of that person, was unrelated to the current supervisor's rating of their actual job performance [17]. Another study found that some LinkedIn profile characteristics were only weakly correlated with job performance metrics or not relevant in a personnel selection process [18]. In sum, even though a lot of information about applicants can successfully be derived from online background checks, the relevance of these data in terms of applicants' job performance needs further investigation.

Assessing an applicant's personality or potential job performance based on information found on social media can include also other risks. Some candidates may, just as

they use impression management strategies during traditional face-to-face job interviews, make conscious efforts to manipulate their online profile so that it reflects them in an unrealistically positive way. The impression management performed by online profile owners may influence the assessment of the candidates by HR professionals. For instance, one study found a positive effect of online impression management utterances (e.g., verbal self-promotion, overcoming of obstacles) on hiring and salary recommendations [5]. However, the extent to which individuals might misrepresent themselves online could be limited, as SNS users' online network of acquaintances overlaps with their offline social network. Therefore, individuals may not present themselves too unrealistically out of fear for negative reactions from their friends [13]. In addition, SNS users do not fully control the content posted on their page, as they can be tagged in other SNS users' pictures. As an SNS profile is less controllable than, for instance, a traditional resume, personal data found online can shed light on other facets of an individual that are not explicitly stated in a professional resume or cover letter. As such, for HR professionals responsible for recruiting, data found on SNS can form a supplementary source of information on job applicants in addition to offline information [19].

## 2.2. Cybervetting in Practice

HR professionals rely on several SNS to gather information about a candidate [10]. They use a variety of platforms, such as Facebook (68%), LinkedIn (65%), Twitter (48%), Instagram (46%) or YouTube (35%) for recruitment purposes [20]. The popularity of LinkedIn might be explained by the fact that this professional oriented SNS offers HR professionals insight into a job applicant's skills and their professional network. How broad and useful the social capital of a job seeker is for the company may be important for management positions or other positions in sales, customer service and communication [21]. The information found on SNS may have important implications for job seekers. Applicants may be rejected for information that is found on their social media profiles, especially information concerning questionable behavior or "red flags" [4]. Alcohol use, drugs and sexually suggestive information are among the most important reasons for rejecting a candidate [6]. Discriminatory comments related to gender, religion or race may also negatively affect the evaluation of the candidate [6]. Another study among recruiters on information found on social media about job candidates found that references to alcohol consumption, marijuana, political posts, but also spelling and grammar mistakes, were the most important turnoffs [20]. Although alcohol use and other spare time behaviors may be considered being part of one's private life, for employers seeing employees as extensions of the organization's image, the employees' actions outside of a work context should also be known, as they could affect the organization's image [22]. Therefore, in the early stages of reviewing candidates, employers are found to scan online profiles in search for images or other personal information that could signal potential risks [23]. There is a lack of theoretical insights and an absence of data to support that information found online would be relevant for an individual's job performance. Additionally, screening candidates on SNS lacks standardization. Different screeners may also look for different information online and interpret those data differently [24]. The variability in the available information on SNS of competing job applicants threatens an equal treatment of candidates [25].

## 2.3. The Importance of Visual and Textual Cues for Cybervetting

The way in which information that is accessible via SNS influences the decision making by HR professionals might be similar to cues that influence them during traditional job interviews, such as their looks and their writing skills.

As far as face-to-face contact is concerned during a job interview, studies found that the physical appearance of job seekers influence HR professionals' assessment [26]. People who are found attractive are evaluated more positively (based on the heuristic: what's beautiful is good) [27,28]. Physically attractive individuals benefit from their looks when evaluated for a job [26,29]. This halo effect has been linked with personality factors

related to productivity, such as self-confidence [30]. The importance of a candidate's physical appearance is also illustrated by a qualitative study in which HR-professionals were asked to speak about a candidate they just met. When describing the candidate, physical characteristics were often first enumerated. Their discourse centered around embodied capability where bodily fitness of candidates is interpreted as a reflection of their competencies and qualities [31]. SNS not only offer HR professionals the possibility to see (and assess) the physical attractiveness of a candidate based on a (well-chosen) profile photo, but also by other pictures that appear on the individual's timeline, pictures wherein the person is tagged and other group photographs that are less controllable by an individual. Therefore, it is important for job seekers who are active on SNS to assess how their profile picture (and other publicly accessible pictures) could be interpreted by potential employers. Having no profile picture at all is not an option. A profile lacking a face picture leads to doubts about the profile's credibility. Having a 'face pic' secures the 'existence' of the profile owner [21,22].

Next to visual cues about a candidate, textual information is also assessed, which provides HR professionals with an indication of the writing skills of job applicants [16]. By comparing this unconstrained everyday writing to the more formal style in a candidate's cover letter and resume, recruiters may gain a deeper insight into the writing capacities of the candidate. In addition to writing style, also the content of the writing matters. Frequency of writing about certain topics may be a proxy for personal interests. The use of pejorative terms or other offensive language may also signal certain values [32]. Additionally, recruiters may also check the networks (friend lists and contact lists) that job seekers have on their social media profiles, in order to assess their social capital and the size of their professional networks. Some recruiters also evaluate how applicants interact with other social network users, as an informal confirmation of their social competencies [33].

#### 2.4. Study's Objectives

This study aims to gain insight into cybervetting by: (1) investigating if and to what extent HR professionals search information about job candidates on SNS; (2) determining how they interpret the information they found; and by (3) interviewing both HR professionals of governmental and profit organizations, to investigate potential differences.

As the present study investigates motives for and practices of cybervetting, especially qualitative research offers the opportunity to ask respondents to explain what kind of information they check on SNS, which conclusions they draw from it but also how they interpret a candidate's absence from social media [17]. Moreover, this study investigates how social-profit organizations are using SNS for recruitment and how this potentially differs from profit-organizations. Differences may exist between HR professionals of different sectors. Next to profit-organizations, also social-profit organizations increasingly use SNS for internal and external communication. Due to the financial constraints that these organizations face, better performances are expected with a limited budget [34]. Therefore, these organizations may turn to social media as a cheap way to search for, communicate with, and to vet job applicants. On the other hand, commercial organizations are more driven by profit and are characterized by taking rapid calculated decisions. This may contrast with social-profit organizations which may have a slower bureaucratic decision-making process [35]. However, governments and other social-profit organizations may increasingly accord with profit organizations as far as decision-making processes are concerned, since they have also evolved through the introduction of new public management, which include key-values such as efficiency and economy [36]. By investigating SNS screening practices of HR professionals of both profit versus governmental organizations, the present study adds to the current literature by evaluating the potential differences in how specific information found on SNS may influence HR professionals' decision making. The present study further focuses on two contrasting subsectors, local authorities and telecom companies, to compare HR professionals' experiences. We choose to concentrate on two subsectors to contrast experiences. Whereas telecom companies can be seen as innovative, rapidly adopting

technology driven applications within their organizations' processes, local authorities may have fewer financial means and might be less technology driven.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Sample

The data were collected through 24 semi-structured interviews with HR professionals in the Netherlands. First, contact details of potential interviewees, HR professionals of local governments and telecom companies, were collected. Potential respondents of this convenience sample were contacted by sending out e-mails and phone calls with the request if they wanted to participate in this study about the use of social media in the recruitment process. In total, 24 HR professionals (15 women, 9 men) participated in the interviews, with 8 respondents being employed by telecommunications companies and 16 being employed by Dutch local governments. The participants were between 23 and 61 years old ( $M = 41.0$ ;  $SD = 9.74$ ) and had an average work experience as HR employee of 13 years ( $M = 13.69$ ;  $SD = 9.61$ ). The characteristics of the respondents are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Overview of the respondents and their characteristics.

Respondent Number	Gender	Age	Years of Experience
Profit sector			
R1P	Female	40	8
R2P	Female	26	6
R3P	Female	28	1
R4P	Male	46	16
R5P	Female	27	3
R6P	Female	37	15
R7P	Female	40	20
R8P	Female	41	5
Non-profit sector			
R1NP	Female	41	8
R2NP	Female	44	16
R3NP	Female	38	10
R4NP	Female	48	28
R5NP	Male	34	5
R6NP	Female	46	12
R7NP	Female	31	1
R8NP	Female	46	12
R9NP	Male	41	14
R10NP	Male	53	21
R11NP	Male	53	1
R12NP	Female	61	12
R13NP	Male	56	23
R14NP	Male	36	10
R15NP	Male	30	7
R16NP	Male	55	25

#### 3.2. Procedures

All interviews were conducted by the same researcher and held at the respondents' workplace. A semi-structured interview protocol was applied. Before the start of the interview, the respondents were assured that their conversations would remain confidential and that their responses were anonymous. The conversations lasted between 20 and 39 minutes. All interviews were recorded with participants' consent. The recordings were transcribed verbatim. The names of the respondents were removed from the transcripts and replaced by a code consisting of the type of the organization they belonged to (P = respondent from a profit organization; NP: respondent from non-profit organization) and the number of the

interviewee (e.g., R1). The respondents' gender, age at the time of the interview as well as the number of years of professional experience within HR management are indicated (e.g., R1P, female, age: 40, HR experience: 9). If the respondents named their company, the name of the company was removed from the transcripts to ensure the respondents' anonymity.

### 3.3. Measures

The semi-structured interview guide included questions about the types of offline and online information used by the participants during the recruitment process. We inquired which types of information are deemed important by the participants. In our interviews we focused on whether the respondents used online information found on social media and to what types of online personal information they paid attention. Depending on the participants' responses some questions were rephrased by the interviewer, the order of the questions was rearranged, or the interviewer asked additional questions in order to focus on a topic or theme that was brought up by the participants.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using NVivo 10. In order to become familiar with the conversations, the transcripts were carefully read by the researcher. Using an open coding procedure, a code was provided to the answers that were given by the respondents. This was carried out for four interviews with respondents from a local government and two interviews from respondents of a telecommunications company. In a second step, the codes were grouped according to their thematic similarities. Overlapping codes were merged so that only one overlapping code remained. Based on this tree-structure, the remaining interviews were coded. Afterwards the transcripts of the interviews were reviewed again to check whether the data were properly coded. For the purpose of this publication, the quotations were translated from Dutch into English. The quotations were kept as close as possible to the respondents' original expressions and are structured around the central themes that emerged.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Online Information as a Complementary Source

When evaluating a candidate, the interviewed HR-professionals first focus on the resume and supplementary information sent by the job applicant. Although HR professionals consult online information that they find of applicants, most state that the sent resume is still crucial in deciding whether or not to invite a candidate for an interview. There is more discussion among respondents concerning the value of cover letters. As phrased by one of the respondents: "In the end, in motivation letters all candidates write they really are willing for the job, are highly motivated and enthusiastic" (RP6, female, age: 40, experience: 8). The same doubts are expressed about the added value of referees. As noted by a respondent: "I never experienced that I called a referee who told me "don't do it" (don't hire this person). It's always positive. What does this add?" (R14NP, male, age: 36, experience: 10).

Next to the resume, the personal interview remains an important source of information for HR professionals. By comparing these sources with information found online, some HR professionals come across mismatches. One HR professional cites an example of a mismatch between the candidate's online profile, the competences he was claiming in his CV, and his actual experience: "During the interview we found out that some things (from the LinkedIn profile) did not emerge, that the candidate had a particular experience, could not explain what he exactly has done, what his role was and results" (R1NP, female, age: 41, experience: 8). Therefore, the interview is still an important moment during which candidates are also confronted with information found about them online.

Next to the traditional motivation letter, resume and online profile on SNS such as LinkedIn, a growing number of candidates include a link to a video wherein they present themselves. Two HR professionals of profit-organizations systematically ask applicants to



make and share a video wherein they respond to specific questions sent to the candidates. This offers them more information on how candidates present themselves and how they respond to the submitted questions.

#### 4.2. Digging Deeper

Searching information about job candidates online offers a quick option to check some information and to get a broader picture about the candidate. Some recruiters stress they focus exclusively on professionally oriented SNS and systematically check LinkedIn profiles but not Facebook profiles. As stated by a respondent: “LinkedIn is a business profile, Facebook is private” (R2NP, female, age: 44, experience: 16). Nevertheless, some HR managers also consult the candidates’ Facebook and Twitter pages and even perform a Google search on a candidate to check which search results pop up.

Therefore, online information is a supplementary source: “I use the CV, the letter, and this (SNS) is also a source to form an impression of a candidate” (R5NP, male, age: 34, experience: 5). It offers some HR professionals a possibility to get a “broader picture of the candidate. You also try to discover a kind of consistency” (R9NP, male, age: 41, experience: 14). In other words, some recruiters verify information of the vitae or letter with information they find online. In addition, the relation between the applicant and referees that are mentioned in a candidate’s letter, are checked online. Other respondents indicate they scan the candidate’s online information to check if they find something that would not fit in the organization’s culture. Some HR professionals highlight that social media only come into play, when they have doubts concerning whether to invite a candidate: “If I have some doubts when looking at a CV, I look for extra information, like their LinkedIn or Facebook profile” (R2P, female, age: 26, experience: 6).

Some recruiters even go further than a Google search or a search on social media. They use specific software or applications to search and group information of a candidate found online (recruitment intelligence applications). One interviewee indicates to have followed a “recruiter hacking course” (R4P, male, age: 46, experience: 16) wherein he learned, for instance, to get around privacy settings to have a deeper insight into information posted of candidates on their SNS timeline.

The information found on an SNS can change an HR professional’s image of the candidate. Some respondents mention that they found information that had a very strong negative influence on their assessment of a candidate. “Once, I had a candidate who got into trouble for stalking his ex-girlfriend. I found this information in several places online, so ‘where there is smoke, there is fire’. You don’t want to deal with that kind of guy. Even if he has a strong profile, he got into trouble. Everyone deserves a second chance, but this story was all over the place” (R4P, male, age: 46, experience: 16). While this is an extreme example, some respondents clearly state that information found online can lead them to “turn down a candidate” (R3P, female, age: 38, experience: 1). Some of them nuance the influence of online data but state that it can change the way they start the interview or interpret what is said by the interviewee.

Finally, some HR managers use LinkedIn to gain information about a candidate’s network to collect more information about that candidate through an informal chat with a common connection. “On LinkedIn, if I insert the name of someone, I see common contacts. These contacts are often in sales and marketing of organizations and then I contact them . . . I ask how they evaluate him, how long have they worked together, . . . ” (R6P, female, age: 37, experience: 15).

Not only can SNS play a role as a supplementary source of information for HR professionals, job candidates also use it to gain more information about their employer to prepare for the job interview or even to try to connect with the interviewer. Some recruiters attest that candidates had searched for information about them as they referred to specific topics as a conversation starter. For instance, they refer to a former job of the interviewer. This happens not always in the most subtle way, as one recruiter testifies: “You go meeting a candidate at the elevator and he tries to complement me right away that it’s

clear I have worked in the fashion industry by the way I am dressed” (R7P, female, age: 40, experience: 20).

#### 4.3. *The Importance of Images*

One advantage of SNS is that HR professionals get access to images posted by candidates themselves or relatives. This offers insight into their daily lives, activities, and personal engagements. If someone portrays himself as a ‘professional’ in the documents sent to the company, some HR managers check this on their SNS profile. For instance, a candidate presented himself on his LinkedIn profile with a picture where he was drinking alcohol. “It was a holiday picture. Well, that made me think. You describe yourself as a professional, then you need to add a picture that looks professional, not a spare time picture”. Some respondents observe this more among younger candidates, “Shop advisors are often younger candidates and sometimes you see pleasant pictures coming by. Then you think, is this wise to share those pictures . . . drunk on a bar, short skirt, joint. I ask myself, if those individuals display themselves like this, will they behave in a position where they are visible for a broader public?” (R3P, female, age: 38, experience: 1).

Some recruiters take pictures presenting a candidate drinking alcohol very seriously, while others try to contextualize the drinking in the setting of the picture. Also, the number of pictures found on a SNS profile where the candidate is drinking alcohol, plays a role. If they found a majority of pictures of a partying candidate, it can have a negative influence on the evaluation of the candidate. Moreover, if an HR manager can find those pictures, others doing business with the company might too: “If you have a position in a company where you have contacts with clients, they can also look you up and find those pictures” (R4P, male, age: 46, experience: 16).

Personal information, such as claims of one’s competences, but also pictures of a person that were not posted by the candidate but by others, may have a warranting effect. In other words, perceivers view personal information posted by others as having a higher warranting value as compared to self-claims or other information posted by the person themselves.

Some HR professionals highlight also other conclusions they draw from pictures candidates post on their online profile page: “People who are laughing on a picture, I see them as more spontaneous. I really appreciate it when they use that kind of picture on their profile” (R5NP, female, age: 34, experience: 5). Others give negative examples of pictures: “A lot of individuals use selfies on their online profile page, for instance, a selfie taken from above that accentuates the cleavage, is not professional” (R2P, female, age: 28, experience: 6). Some HR professionals particularly look for photographs online, as the physical appearance is thought to be important for the job: “Very often I receive CVs without a picture. Then I look them up because, for this position you’re in a shop. It is important to look good” (R2P, female, age: 28, experience: 6).

#### 4.4. *Language Proficiency*

In several interviews, HR professionals highlighted that they also check the language proficiency and writing style of a candidate. “If there are too many spelling errors or its badly written, it tells a lot about their verbal communication” (R3P, female, age: 38, experience: 1). Then the application is not taken seriously since “if you make these mistakes in your CV, then you take your job candidature not seriously” (R7P, female, age: 40, experience: 20). Some HR professionals nuance the importance of the candidate’s writing style and spelling by stating that it depends on the position they are applying for, but “if someone makes annoying spelling mistakes and you search for someone who is accurate and detail oriented and has a good language proficiency, then it’s expected that his letter is well written and he also expresses himself online correctly” (R14NP, male, age: 36, experience: 10). Grammar and other mistakes may thus play a role: “If someone tells me that he is very precise, and his vitae is full of mistakes, then I will reject this candidate. In



a job with a lot of client contacts, where communication is important, this is a weakness” (R7P, female, age: 40, experience: 20).

How “someone sells himself on social media” (R7P, female, age: 40, experience: 20) is important for some recruiters. Some HR professionals compare the information found on social media with their CV: “I check if the same is integrated on the CV, I also look at recommendations and their group memberships, which pages they like and the short text on their profile if something appears that is not present in their CV” (R1P, female, age: 40, experience: 8).

#### 4.5. Disadvantages of Using Information from SNS-Profiles

HR professionals value information found on SNS but also have a critical stance towards it. They are conscious of the fact that what they see online, especially on LinkedIn, is sometimes the result of impression management, as highlighted by an interviewee “If I look at the LinkedIn profiles of people I know or I’ve worked with, I think that they certainly achieved this during my holidays; everyone exaggerates on their profile” (R5NP, male, age: 34, experience: 5). They are aware that only positive aspects are shown on the online profile. Therefore, this information “may play a role, but it is not decisive” (R2NP, female, age: 44, experience: 16). The interviewed professionals are aware of the risk they could be influenced by the information they find online. Moreover, some HR professionals highlight the importance of a job interview: “someone can have a very strong CV online, but you can debunk this during the interview” (R5P, female, age: 27, experience: 3). Besides, some information found about a candidate may have been put online by someone else. Therefore, HR professionals are aware that this information may not correspond with who someone is in reality.

#### 4.6. How Absences from SNS Is Interpreted

Browsing social media to search for information about job candidates appears to have become a part of the selection process. Being present on SNS is informative for recruiters, but also not being present on SNS says something about candidates and makes some recruiters wonder, “This is particular, that makes me think, he is not keeping up with the times” (R1P, female, age: 40, experience: 8). Some are even more triggered to look for other information online: “I think this is really mysterious. This is interesting and makes me look further for information” (R3P, female, age: 38, experience: 1). Especially when it concerns young job candidates as “Nowadays, especially young people, almost everybody, is on LinkedIn or Facebook” (R2P, female, age: 28, experience: 6). Moreover, presence on social media can be interpreted as a sign of having a young spirit, “I assess quite often candidates who are older, if they are totally up to date, with a LinkedIn profile and a link to their own website, I really think this is positive” (R1P, female, age: 40, experience: 8).

Nevertheless, some HR managers also respect an individual’s choice not to be present online: “It’s a person’s own choice, if someone tells me he doesn’t have a LinkedIn profile because he does not want to be found online, it’s OK for me. He made that choice, thought about it ( . . . ). I respect someone’s deliberate choice to be online or not” (R6P, female, age: 37, experience: 15).

#### 4.7. Difference between Profit Sector and Governmental Organizations

Based on the interviews, the differences between how profit-organizations and governmental organizations screen their candidates, seem to be limited. First, professionals of both types of organizations use SNS to evaluate candidates. So, there are no differences in frequency of usage of SNS for investigating the profile of a candidate. However, one major difference concerns how political preferences of job candidates may play a role. HR-professionals of governmental organizations seem to pay more attention to this. Referring to political engagement, a respondent states: “It’s important that people think before they post that kind of information online” (R2NP, female, age: 44, experience: 16). This may be explained by the fact that social profit and governmental organizations are in close contact

with policymakers. Some interviewees are apprehensive of possible conflicts of interest. Civil servants “have freedom of speech, however, when you work for government, you need to act with integrity” (R3NP, female, age: 38, experience: 10). Nevertheless, some HR professionals explicitly state that when candidates disclose their political preference, this may not play a role in the selection process: “I never look at this. In thirty years I have never experienced that someone said: hey, he has that kind of political preference, therefore I want or I refuse this candidate. Never. If this would happen, if a selection committee would be influenced by this, I would say, wait a minute, if I delete this information from his CV, what do you say then about the candidate?” (R13NP, male, age: 56, experience: 30). Other HR managers are puzzled by the fact that someone would disclose their political preference online. “I would ask myself why does he want to explicitly put that online, because you don’t see that often” (R1P, female, age: 40, experience: 8). As public organizations have to collaborate with policy makers, several HR managers highlight that expressing political ideas or involvement online, can be sensitive.

Finally, some HR managers from public organizations make a difference in how spare time activities may play a role, based on the position a candidate is applying for: “If you are an administrative assistant, then it is not that much important what you’re doing during the weekend. It’s different if you have been entrusted a public function” (R6NP, female, age: 46, experience: 12). In more public functions an employee with some responsibilities is seen as representing the institution and therefore, some HR managers are also concerned about what can be found about these individuals online concerning their spare time activities and engagement.

#### *4.8. Why Some HR Professionals Refuse to Use SNS*

Not all respondents scrutinize candidates online. In total, ten out of the twenty-four respondents indicate that they generally do not use social media to collect information about job candidates. The most cited reason is that they do not want to judge a candidate based on online information. Another reason is the division between private life and work. A lot of information that can be found online has nothing to do with one’s professional life. Therefore, some HR professionals do not want to form an opinion about a candidate based on information that has nothing to do with one’s professional qualities. “If someone has a drunk picture on Facebook, it does not mean that he will not perform well in his job” (R6P, female, age: 37, experience: 15). While respondents think that some pictures posted on SNS are part of one’s private life, they think it is not clever to make them publicly accessible, “You have to be aware of what you’re posting on Facebook. You don’t want a recruiter of a company to see you in a bikini or have a look at your pictures of a party in Ibiza. If you’re looking for a job, hide some of your pictures. However, I also think that one has the right to have a private life, I don’t dig into it” (R5P, female, age: 27, experience: 3). Some HR professionals give also other reasons for not screening the SNS information of candidates. They indicate that they do not want to prejudge a candidate. “I am afraid I would attach importance to what he’s doing in his spare time, therefore I don’t look at that information (on Facebook)” (R7NP, female, age: 31, experience: 1). When making rapid decisions, it can be tempting to base them on online information. However, it can also inspire a wrong decision about a candidate when it is based on erroneous or incomplete information. Some HR professionals criticize the fact that opinions would be formed about a candidate without meeting that individual in person, or as one respondent states: “I don’t want to make a judgement about someone, based on a party picture” (R5P, female, age: 27, experience: 3). Some HR professionals are aware that images found online may lead to rapid conclusions about someone: “If I find a lot of pictures of someone at parties, with a lot of alcohol, I think: will he be fit on Saturday morning to work in the shop?” (R3P, female, age: 38, experience: 1).

Another risk linked to online screening of candidates is that you have to be sure you’re looking at online information about that specific person and not individuals with the same or a similar name. Some HR managers only check a candidate online, if they have questions

or doubts based on the interview, “I would do it, when I have doubts. If you have an interview with someone and some crazy stuff is coming out of the interview or I have doubts, then I would do some further investigation” (R1P, female, age: 40, experience: 8).

Notwithstanding the abovementioned risks of information posted online, SNS offer individuals also opportunities to get noticed in a positive way. The presence of references, trainings, engagements, may offer a broader picture of a candidate, “if you see that someone is active on different fronts, you see someone does things with passion, this radiates from the information found online” (R14NP, male, age: 36, experience: 10).

## 5. Discussion

As a growing number of individuals are disclosing personal information on SNS from a young age and share this information with a diversity of social circles, the present study assessed if and how HR professionals use personal information they find on SNS to check and evaluate job applicants. To gain a deeper insight into their motives, in-depth interviews were conducted. This study contributes to the literature by: (1) investigating which information about job candidates HR professionals search for on SNS; (2) determining how HR managers interpret this information; and by (3) sounding out HR managers of governmental and profit organizations, we investigated potential differences.

In general, HR managers were found to, first and foremost, rely on the traditional cover letter, CV and job interview to make decisions. SNS were used as an additional source of information by some HR managers in several phases of the selection process. However, when screening job applications, they often searched for information about candidates online to check for possible mismatches between claimed experiences and competences, and the information found online. This is in line with Swedish research that found that recruiters value transparency and truthfulness, and use social media to verify the truthfulness of a job candidate’s application file [12]. Some respondents state they only check LinkedIn as this is a professional SNS, while others indicate checking Facebook, Twitter and performing a Google search to check what information pops up. It gives HR professionals a broader picture of candidates, as they gain insight into what moves them and whether the candidates would fit in the organizational culture.

Also, their language proficiency and how they ‘sell’ themselves online are important, depending on the position they apply for. The respondents are aware that how someone presents themselves online can be the product of impression management. Therefore, by gaining access to the candidate’s online social network, common connections can be found that serve as an interesting supplementary source of information. From the information found online, pictures play an important role in the evaluation of job applicants, and especially photographs posted by a job candidate’s connections have a warranting effect. As pictures but also information posted by an applicant’s connections can be less manipulated, it is assumed to be more reliable [37,38].

Pictures were also seen as informative when it considers a candidate’s spare time activities, drinking behavior and physical appearance. HR professionals from governmental organizations differed from professionals of the profit-sector by the fact that political views may play a role for the former. However, some HR professionals of governmental organizations nuance this, as political views of a job candidate would be more important for some (executive) functions.

In sum, some HR professionals use SNS to have a more complete picture of the candidate and in order to assess the truthfulness of their applications. As social media offer insight into one’s personal network, spare time activities and opinions concerning topical issues, it covers more aspects of one’s personality than a CV. Nevertheless, some HR managers do not collect personal information about job candidates through social media, as they want to make a clear distinction between private life and work. They do not want their assessment of candidates to be influenced by information that is not related to their professional qualities. In contrast, one respondent indicated to have followed a ‘recruiter hacking course’ to be able to dig deeper into online information and trespass

privacy settings. Finally, the absence of job candidates from social media makes some HR professionals extra alert. While some conclude that job candidates who have no online presence are not keeping up with the times, others respect this deliberate choice. Some respondents, puzzled by this absence from social media, feel encouraged to dig deeper. Prior research suggests that HR professionals who are searching for information about a candidate, may consider this online absence as negative, interpreting this absence as a suspicion that this person could have something to hide [24]. While some may think this person has something to hide, another may think that the individual wants to protect their privacy, others may think that person is too lazy to complete or update their profile [19]. Further research could (experimentally) investigate the impact of the presence or absence of specific information online about job candidates [2].

### 5.1. Implications

The study's results highlight the importance for SNS users to deal with the diversity of audiences that are merged in their SNS friend list. A SNS user's friend list consists of a diverse range of contacts, from family members to (former) colleagues and friends. Some SNS users have a publicly accessible online profile. This offers (potential) employers access to information that was not available in the past, due to collapsing contexts [39]. In online networked environments, such as SNS, it is harder to separate publics. Some information shared on SNS may be entirely appropriate for the profile owner's friends, whereas contacts from other contexts may feel negatively about the posting of such content. More particularly, HR professionals now have access to non-work-related personal information that may influence the personnel selection process. Being aware of this, may result in some users limiting their disclosures to the lowest common denominator. They might only post content which they assume to be appropriate for the diverse publics who will be able to access this information. However, younger or less experienced users may have difficulties in imagining the broad and diverse audience they have created for their profile [40]. Therefore, they may post information online that is accessible for future employers to consider. Although research found that the more diverse one's circle of friends is on SNS, the more users are inclined to segment their friend list into more specific groups [41,42]. SNS users could experience a false sense of privacy as personal information shared even with a limited number of SNS contacts (e.g., a specific friend list) does not guarantee this information is not forwarded to individuals outside this chosen public. Other information of a person's spare time, opinions and relations may become accessible and therefore also considered by HR professionals, information that was unavailable in the past. This possibly expands a candidate's selection process beyond mere professional characteristics. What's more, this also challenges the boundaries between privacy and what is considered as work-related information, or at least information relevant in a job selection process.

In light of the study's findings, it is therefore important for individuals to build and manage their digital career capital [21]. With this notion, the authors extend conceptualization of career capital, consisting of competences, identities, motivations and relationships providing career value, to the online context [43]. Increasingly, it is important to make this career capital visible online. Another important implication is that, prior to the social media era, job seekers only presented the information that they themselves selected to potential employers. Today, personal data are accumulating as individuals themselves and their connections continuously post information online. During a job search, all of these data become available. This is in sharp contrast with a pre-social media era where it was easier to present a selection of information to stress one's employability. Therefore, members of the active population have to present "enduring shows of competence, professionalism, and connectedness" and, what's more, "across any sources employers might use" (p. 107, [21]). As such a tension may exist between an individual's authenticity on social media and their need for impression management. Especially as different social circles of one's personal and professional life may come together on social media. Results of the present study call job applicants to check and, if needed, curate their online visibility to enhance their

job opportunities. While digital absence may be detrimental for job applicants, it is important for them to consider to digitally scrub their online profile before applying for a job. While deleting some information may diminish one's authenticity online, the use of privacy settings and dividing one's diverse 'friend list' in different groups, may be useful to offer a selective access to specific personal information. Nevertheless, as one of the main characteristics of digital data is its replicability, it remains difficult to contain specific information within a selective group.

The results of the present study may caution (future) applicants to consider which information is available of them online and which specific data may be interpreted negatively by potential employers [44]. At the same time, employers need evidence-based methods in order to develop a standardized code of conduct concerning the use of social media information of applicants, which is currently lacking [45]. As using SNS data for assessing a job candidate is contested, proposals could be made to develop fair information practices. More particularly, concerning double-checks that would be recommended when finding (sensitive) information online, agreements on limits concerning the types of personal data that may be collected. Umbrella organizations of economic sectors may take the initiative to formulate conditions for online screening and use of data in the selection process to respect the applicant's privacy [44], especially as research found that companies using SNS as a selection tool were perceived less fair or less attractive than organizations that did not [46]. Therefore, employers should be aware of the possible negative perception surrounding the use of SNS to screen applicants. By disclosing information about their fair information practices in the context of job applications or by stating that SNS data will not be used in the context of recruitment, candidates may be informed explicitly about the company's policy.

Besides, more research is needed to guide employers to collect personal information and make valid inferences concerning an applicant's job-related characteristics, based on the SNS data [45]. While some experimental research has been conducted [47,48], future research could also explore how job performance can be predicted by HR professionals based on the information found in applicants' SNS profiles. Until the methods for collecting and assessing information found on social media are proven to be valid and reliable, some researchers call for refraining the use of information found in social media to assess job applicants [17]. Similarly, more research is needed into the ethics of potential misrepresentation on social media by job applicants.

## 5.2. Limitations

Several limitations of the present study have to be mentioned. First, this study focused on a specific form of cybervetting, the collection and use of information online to evaluate job applicants. Until now, potential employee-related cybervetting is the primary focus in research [2]. Therefore, future research could concentrate on other 'targets', for instance how job solicitors cybervet potential employers.

Second, this interview-study is solely based on self-reports. Employers' reported opinions may not represent their selecting behavior in concrete situations [49]. However, the researchers of the present study guaranteed the anonymous reporting of the interview data. Moreover, several anecdotes revealed by the interviewees illustrate some far-reaching practices the respondents entrusted to the researchers. This also illustrates that the respondents felt free to talk about their experiences.

Third, the limited number of interviews and the fact that conversations were conducted with professionals of two sectors, might also limit the generalizability of the study's findings. Nevertheless, by contrasting two sectors this study investigated if cybervetting practices are similar or different in profit versus governmental organizations. Next to broadening the perspective by including HR professionals of different sectors, future research could also focus on possible cultural differences. Moreover, future quantitative research could further assess and compare which social media platforms are used by HR professionals to collect information about job applicants.

## 6. Conclusions

Cybervetting is an emerging issue where companies are increasingly using technology to screen job applicants by consulting publically available information, such as social media posts. Our study aimed to generate a deeper understanding of this phenomenon. The results of our study indicated that some HR managers did screen job applicants' posts and that they placed important value on pictures. Governmental organizations also take into account the political expressions of a candidate. Our study showed that cybervetting is a nuanced process and that some HR managers do not engage in cybervetting in order to protect boundaries between work and private life. The results of our study highlight the need for more ethical considerations regarding cybervetting and for applicants to consider the impact of their social media use on their privacy and on their assessment by recruiters during the job application process.

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