Social media snooping on job applicants

The effects of unprofessional social media information on recruiter perceptions

John Bret Becton
Department of Management and International Business, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, USA
H. Jack Walker
Department of Management, Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama, USA
J. Bruce Gilstrap
nQativ, Lubbock, Texas, USA, and
Paul H. Schwager
Department of Management Information Systems, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina, USA

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate how HR professionals use social networking website information to evaluate applicants' propensity to engage in counterproductive work behaviors and suitability for hire.

Design/methodology/approach – Using an experimental design, 354 HR professionals participated in a two-part study. In part 1, participants viewed a fictitious resume and rated the applicant's likelihood to engage in counterproductive work behavior as well as likelihood of a hiring recommendation. In part 2, participants viewed a fictitious social networking website profile for the applicant and repeated the ratings from part 1. The authors analyzed their responses to determine the effect viewing a social network website (SNW) profile had on ratings of the applicant.

Findings – Unprofessional SNW information negatively affected ratings of applicants regardless of applicants' qualifications, while professional SNW profile information failed to improve evaluations regardless of qualifications.

Originality/value – Anecdotal reports suggest that many employers use SNW information to eliminate job applicants from consideration despite an absence of empirical research that has examined how SNW content influences HR recruiters' evaluation of job applicants. This study represents one of the first attempts to understand how HR professionals use such information in screening applicants. The findings suggest that unprofessional SNW profiles negatively influence recruiter evaluations while professional SNW profile content has little to no effect on evaluations.

Keywords Social media, Selection, Facebook, Recruiting, Counterproductive work behaviour, Social networking websites

Paper type Research paper

While many people live their lives openly through social media or social network websites (SNWs) – posting everything from thoughts about politics to photos of their meals, few probably consider the career-related consequences of "over-sharing" on social media. Those party pics from a wild night in college are harmless, right? Maybe not. There is extensive evidence that more and more employers are using applicants' SNW content during the employee selection process (Smith, 2012). For example, surveys report that between 35 and 63 percent of employers viewing SNWs during selection eliminated an applicant from further consideration based on SNW content (e.g. Davis, 2006; Grasz, 2013). Additional research has found that 43 percent of organizations use social media sites to research candidates and

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approximately 50 percent of employers report rejecting job applicants because of social media content (Gurchiek, 2014). Recently, Hoek *et al.* (2016) examined employers' use of social networking websites during employee selection by conducting in-depth interviews with 15 organizations to understand how SNW information is accessed, observed and utilized in selection procedures. Their findings revealed that SNW profiles are accessed both as part of organizations' official selection processes in which candidate permission is gained and through covert observation without candidate consent. Furthermore, the authors called into question the extent to which SNWs were reflective of the person, whether a candidate's personal life reflected their work persona and how different types of SNWs are used for different reasons (e.g. Facebook used to assess organization fit and soft skills, whereas LinkedIn to assess professional attributes and job fit).

Clearly, more and more employers are making use of SNW in employee selection processes, which makes it all the more important for researchers to address relevant concerns about this practice. Indeed, there are substantive issues raised by the use of this information (see Jeske and Shultz, 2016 for an extensive review). For example, there are legal concerns surrounding this practice, largely because protected-class information is often readily available through individuals' SNWs (Kluemper *et al.*, 2012; Kowske and Southwell, 2006), creating the potential for claims of illegal discrimination. Applicant reactions to the use of social media are an important consideration as well. Recent research into respect for privacy and information privacy concerns indicates that applicants have strong reactions to the use of social media in employment screening (Drake *et al.*, 2016; Jeske and Shultz, 2019). Another study examined how applicants react to social media content of their prospective immediate supervisor and found that negative information such as alcohol abuse information negatively affected attitudes toward the manager and their willingness to apply for a position reporting to them (Ballweg *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, because the use of social media is a relatively new phenomenon, there are questions about the validity of these practices (Brown and Vaughn, 2011; Davison *et al.*, 2011; Roth *et al.*, 2016) as much of the information gleaned from social media is not job related (Gurchiek, 2014). To date, however, only a handful of empirical studies have addressed this issue, and the evidence is mixed (cf., Becton *et al.*, 2017; Kluemper and Rosen, 2009; Park *et al.*, 2015; Stoughton *et al.*, 2013; Van Iddekinge *et al.*, 2016; Youyou *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, much of the recent research on SNWs has focused on their use to find job candidates online but not on the use of SNW information as a post-application tool (Ollington *et al.*, 2013), so less is known about how this information is used to screen applicants.

We seek to contribute to the nascent literature on the use of SNW content in employee selection processes as a post-application tool. Specifically, we use an experimental design to examine the possibility that employers' evaluations of candidates are strongly influenced by unprofessional SNW content, suggesting that such information triggers negativity and extremity biases (Skowronski and Carlston, 1989). Similarly, we consider the effects of professional or positive SNW content on employers' evaluations of candidates. At last, we explore the possibility that applicant sex influences how recruiters use SNW information during selection processes. This study provides theoretical and practical understanding of why SNWs are used during selection and the possible consequences of doing so.

Employee selection processes and social media information

Although resumes present mostly factual information such as educational achievement, experience, etc., employers also use resumes to form impressions about dispositional characteristics such as personality, intelligence, leadership and work ethic (e.g. Cable and Gilovich, 1998; Cole *et al.*, 2009), and in turn, use those impressions to assess employability (Brown and Campion, 1994; Cole *et al.*, 2003, 2007). More recently, employers have begun using SNW content in a similar manner. Social media is a popular means of online

self-presentation through which users build connections and interact with others (Smith and Kidder, 2010) by sharing a wide range of information (e.g. photos, interests, activities, experiences, relationship status, professional accomplishments, etc.). The type and manner in which this information is shared on SNWs can have important consequences for job applicants. For example, Scott *et al.* (2014) found that factors as simple as language (i.e. correct/incorrect spelling, text speak, etc.) influence recruiter perceptions of applicant intelligence, competence and employability.

Some managers argue that using SNWs during selection is necessary to protect employers from negligent hiring (Clark and Roberts, 2010). This lends support to the contention that employers overwhelmingly look for negative or inappropriate (i.e. unprofessional) information when searching applicants' SNWs (Grasz, 2009; Stoughton *et al.*, 2013; Wortham, 2009). Unprofessional content may involve excessive comments about and pictures of alcohol, comments about sexual activity, provocative or nude photos and profanity, all of which are abundant in SNWs (Peluchette and Karl, 2007). A recent survey revealed that employers opt not to hire someone based on a variety of unprofessional social media activity such as posting provocative or inappropriate photos or similar information (46 percent), posting information about themselves drinking or using drugs (41 percent), bad-mouthing previous employers/coworkers (36 percent) or posting discriminatory comments (28 percent) (Gurchiek, 2014). Indeed, a relatively high percentage of employers who view SNWs use them to eliminate applicants from further consideration (Davis, 2006; Grasz, 2009). In fact, one poll reported that 89 percent of HR professionals indicated they would be less likely to hire a candidate whose SNW showed evidence of "unprofessional behavior" (Grasz, 2009).

To date, much of the available information about the use of SNWs in the hiring process comes from polls and surveys and lacks theoretical grounding. Although such information provides some insight into real-world practices, it is merely descriptive. Our purpose in this paper is to provide prescriptive insights by testing theory-derived hypotheses. We address some fundamental questions about the role of SNW content in selection processes. Working from the assumption that employers weigh multiple sources of information when making selection decisions, how influential is unprofessional SNW content in comparison to other application information? Specifically, we examine how recruiters' evaluation of applicants based on resume content, upon which most first impressions of applicants are based, changes after viewing SNW.

Theoretical perspective and hypotheses

Many employers view searching SNWs as a means of getting a snapshot of an applicant's character (Campbell, 2008) and fit with the organization (Grasz, 2009). Employers' use of SNWs to assess applicant "character" and "fit" suggests that employers believe SNW content reflect something of the applicant's true identity and apply that impression to expectations of workplace attitudes and behaviors. Such implicit theories are not without foundation. According to interactionist theories of sociology (Buss, 1987; Snyder and Ickes, 1985; Swann, 1987), individuals select and create their social environments to match their dispositions, attitudes and self-views. That is, individuals choose environments to inhabit and purposefully seek to influence them (Buss, 1987). These environments provide glimpses of their inner life that others use to make judgments about them (Gosling *et al.*, 2002). SNWs exist in virtual environments and are subject to the same influences and judgments.

We suggest that employers will expect unprofessional SNW content to manifest itself in the workplace as well. This may happen even when other evidence (e.g. resume content) suggests the applicant is well qualified because not all evidence is weighted equally. Various studies in psychology suggest that, all things being equal, negative events tend to elicit more physiological, affective, cognitive and behavioral activity and prompt more cognitive

analysis than neutral or positive events (Taylor, 1991). In fact, a great deal of research suggests that negative information more strongly influences people's evaluations than comparably extreme positive information (Baumeister *et al.*, 2001; Ito *et al.*, 1998; Kanouse and Hanson, 1972; Peeters and Czapinski, 1990; Skowronski and Carlston, 1989). This research stream consistently shows that more negative and more extreme characteristics have a stronger effect on others' impressions of individuals than do their neutral or positive characteristics (e.g. Carlston, 1980; Fiske, 1980). Studies in impression formation, person perception and morality judgments reveal that negative information receives more weight than positive information in social judgments (Fiske and Taylor, 1984, 1991; Kanouse and Hanson, 1972). Thus when individuals integrate multiple cues to form an overall impression, integration biases may result, creating a positive–negative asymmetry effect in which negative information has a stronger effect on impressions than positive information (Bolster and Springbett, 1961).

Similarly, Skowronski and Carlston (1989) suggested that observers categorize actors based on available information about them. However, behaviors are sometimes difficult to categorize distinctively, leading to probabilistic assignment to multiple categories – even to categories that are opposites (e.g. kind, unkind). Taylor (1991) suggested that negative information has been found to have greater explanatory or diagnostic power than positive or neutral information. In other words, some behaviors have greater diagnosticity for this purpose than others; extreme or negative behaviors – such as those commonly found in unprofessional SNW content – have more diagnosticity than moderate or positive behaviors.

Accordingly, integration bias due to the positive–negative asymmetry effect may be present when employers examine SNWs. That is, employers may perceive unprofessional SNW content as more diagnostic and therefore give more weight to that information when forming an impression of the applicant and in subsequent employment decisions. As predicted by positive–negative asymmetry effects, even when employers positively categorize an applicant based on other information (e.g. resume), employers presented with unprofessional SNW content are likely to adjust their categorizations of the applicant negatively. In fact, we expect their impression of the applicant to shift to a negative overall impression such that employers will expect those applicants to engage in more undesirable work behaviors than would those whose resume and SNW content create a positive impression.

In this research, we focus on the effects of SNW content on recruiters' predictions of counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs). CWBs are a set of undesirable work behaviors that are intentional (i.e. not accidental or mandated) and harm or intend to harm organizations and/or organizational stakeholders (Spector and Fox, 2005). Because CWBs by definition work against an organization's goals, organizations wish to avoid CWBs and commit considerable resources to predicting them pre-hire (Ones, 2002). Of particular interest to this study are three dimensions of CWBs: production deviance (i.e. purposeful failure to perform tasks in the manner specified); abuse against others (i.e. hurtful behaviors that cause either physical or psychological harm – threats, nasty comments, ignoring the person or undermining the person's ability to work effectively); and withdrawal (i.e. absence, arriving late or leaving early, taking excessively long breaks). We propose that these three dimensions are the most representative of the types of behaviors employers hope to avoid by screening applicants using SNW content. For example, social media content related to procrastination on class projects, sloppy work, laziness, etc. may be relevant to production deviance (i.e. purposeful failure to perform job tasks effectively the way they are supposed to be performed) whereas social media content related to rude or profane comments toward others on social media may be relevant to abuse against others (i.e. harmful behaviors directed toward coworkers and others that harm either physically or psychologically through making threats, nasty comments, ignoring the person or undermining the person's ability to work effectively). Two dimensions of CWB, sabotage and theft, were omitted from this study because it was difficult

to posit a connection between commonly occurring social media content and manifestations of these behaviors at work. Furthermore, proxies for these types of CWB would most likely be illegal activities, which are unlikely to be posted on social media.

When faced with unprofessional SNW content after viewing applicants' resumes, we expect employers to experience the positive–negative asymmetry effect, thereby forming more negative impressions of the applicant. These impressions, in turn, will result in expectations of higher likelihood to engage in CWBs and reduced likelihood to recommend that the organization hire the applicant. In essence, we expect that employers will perceive applicants as more likely to engage in CWBs if SNW content is unprofessional:

H1a. Unprofessional SNW content will increase the ratings of expected production deviance based on initial resume evaluation alone. Professional SNW content will not change initial ratings of this dimension of CWB.

H1b. Unprofessional SNW content will increase the ratings of expected abuse against others based on initial resume evaluation alone. Professional SNW content will not change initial ratings of this dimension of CWB.

H1c. Unprofessional SNW content will increase the ratings of expected withdrawal behavior based on initial resume evaluation alone. Professional SNW content will not change initial ratings of this dimension of CWB.

H1d. Unprofessional SNW content will decrease the hiring recommendations based on resume evaluation alone. Professional SNW content will not change initial hiring recommendations.

Furthermore, there is considerable evidence that females are judged more harshly than their male counterparts for similar behaviors. For example, sexual behaviors are judged differently based on the gender of the individual in American society (Milhausen and Herold, 1999) such that males tend to receive praise and positive attributions for premarital sexual activity while females are disparaged and stigmatized for similar behaviors (Kreager and Staff, 2009). Studies have also demonstrated that a confirmation bias exists as it relates to this double standard whereby people tend to notice information that confirms the double standard and fail to notice information that refutes it (Marks and Fraley, 2006). Furthermore, this double standard extends to drinking behavior as female alcohol consumption has long been judged more harshly than that of males (Rolando *et al.*, 2016). Rolando *et al.* analyzed YouTube videos of drunkenness and found that female drinking behavior was perceived more negatively, being interpreted as a sign of sexual willingness and strongly stigmatized. Based on this research, we expect that unprofessional SNW content will be more damaging to female applicants as compared to male applicants. Accordingly, we hypothesize the following:

H2. Job applicant sex will influence both ratings of likelihood to engage in CWB and hiring recommendations such that female ratees will be more harshly penalized for unprofessional SNW content in comparison with male ratees.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from a database of 5,207 HR professionals from across the USA purchased from a company providing sales professionals with customer leads. Each person in the database was sent an invitation to participate in the study and participation was incentivized by entrance into a drawing to win a $250 gift card if they completed the study. A total of 354 HR professionals agreed to participate in the study, constituting approximately 7 percent of those contacted. Via e-mail, participants received a link to a

two-part, web-based survey. Participants were predominantly white (83 percent), with the remaining participants consisting of African Americans (10 percent), Hispanics (4 percent), Asians (2 percent) and others (1 percent). Of them, 58 percent were male, and the mean age of participants was approximately 42 years. While we did not ask participants about their professional experience, significant experience was required to be included in the database and participants held titles such as human resource director, human resource manager or hiring manager.

Materials and measures

All materials were contained within the online survey e-mailed to participants. Materials included an informed consent form, a demographic questionnaire, a job description, one fictitious resume, one fictitious SNW profile and scales measuring CWBs and recommendation to hire the fictitious applicant.

Job description. A job description for an entry-level management trainee position in a fictitious organization, Endeavor, Inc., was developed for this study. The job description described a typical management trainee program, the responsibilities associated with the position and the minimum requirements.

Resume quality and applicant sex. Two basic resumes for recent college graduates were developed for this study. One resume represented a "qualified" applicant and the other represented a "highly qualified" applicant. "Qualified" applicants had a 3.0 GPA, dean's list recognition, limited work experience and membership in student groups, while "highly qualified" applicants had a 3.8 GPA, president's list recognition, extensive work experience including internship experience and leadership positions in student groups. Additionally, male and female versions of each resume were developed. Each version of the resume was identical in content and style except for using traditionally male vs female names. An "unqualified" resume condition was not included because in practice employers do not typically investigate SNW content of applicants who fail to meet minimum qualifications.

Social network profile and sex. Two basic SNW profiles were developed to complement the resumes. The fictitious profiles were similar to those found on Facebook, containing a profile, a wall of comments/status updates and photos. We created two versions of each candidate's profile based on anecdotal evidence regarding the information employers typically view negatively (Jobvite, 2013). The "unprofessional" profile contained photos depicting heavy drinking, or comments containing rude or unprofessional language and numerous references to heavy drinking and partying. On the other hand, the "professional" profile contained benign comments about studying in the library and meeting friends for dinner as well as innocuous photos of the applicant having dinner or socializing with friends but with no alcohol visible. For example, we created parallel comments for the "walls" on each profile where the unprofessional profile prominently referenced alcohol or partying while the professional profile did not (i.e. Comment from Friend on Unprofessional Profile: "We need to get together for some beers. I haven't seen you in forever." vs Comment from Friend on Professional Profile: "We need to get together soon. I haven't seen you in forever.") Also, while photos on both profiles were of the applicants in social settings with friends, the unprofessional profile photos involved partying and alcohol, though none were extreme (i.e. passed out, obvious drunkenness). A male and female version of each type of profile was developed but the SNW profiles were identical in terms of comments and activities except for the profile name and accompanying photos being male vs female.

Counterproductive work behaviors. We assessed three dimensions of CWB – production deviance, abuse against others and withdrawal – using 25 items adapted from Spector *et al.* (2006). Participants responded to each item by indicating how often they thought the applicant would engage in certain behaviors if hired, and responses were measured on a

seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = Never to 7 = Daily). Sample items include: "Purposely do work incorrectly" (production deviance), "Insult or make fun of someone at work" (abuse) and "Come to work late without permission" (withdrawal).

Recommendation to hire. To assess participants' hiring recommendation, we created a four-item scale, using three items adapted from Cable and Judge (1997) and a fourth item of our own creation. The first two items assessed the likelihood that the participant would be interested in interviewing the applicant and recommend the applicant be hired, while the third item (our creation) assessed how likely the participant thought the applicant would be to "succeed in the job." We used a six-point Likert-type response scale (1 = Very Unlikely to 6 = Very Likely). The final item assessed the participant's overall evaluation of the applicant.

Procedure

We conducted our study by creating a 2×2×2 between-subjects repeated-measure design. The three factors were the sex of applicant (male vs female), resume quality (qualified vs highly qualified) and SNW content (professional vs unprofessional). Participants were randomly assigned and equally distributed across the eight conditions. Three of the four dependent variables were perceptions of likelihood to engage in forms of counterproductive behavior (production deviance, abusive behavior toward others and withdrawal behavior), while the fourth was likelihood to hire.

Participants were informed that they would be evaluating one applicant for an entry-level management trainee position. Each participant evaluated a single fictitious applicant across two parts of our study. Part 1 contained the brief job description for an entry-level management trainee position along with resumes of fictitious recent college graduates. Two resume factors were manipulated: sex (male, female) and qualifications (qualified, highly qualified). Sex was manipulated because previous research suggests that sex influences the employment selection process (e.g. Davison and Burke, 2000). Applicant qualifications were manipulated to provide a more realistic simulation of the actual employee screening process and to allow the researchers to determine how applicant qualifications might affect employer perceptions of SNW information. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four treatments in part 1 created by crossing the two resume factors (qualified and highly qualified) with the two sexes (male and female) and participants were equally distributed across these conditions. After reviewing the resume, participants rated the applicant's likelihood to engage in several forms of CWB as well as their own likelihood to recommend that the applicant be hired.

In part 2 of the experiment, participants viewed a fictitious SNW corresponding to the resume they had previously seen (i.e. the name and sex of the applicant was manipulated to match the previously reviewed resume). Approximately half of the participants viewed the "professional" content, while the other half viewed the "unprofessional" content. After viewing the SNW profile, we asked participants to use all of the information they had obtained about the applicant (i.e. resume and SNW profile) to assess the same set of CWB.

Results

Intercorrelations among the variables are presented in Table I. Means and standard deviations for the variables by experimental condition are presented in Table II. Additionally, a box plot of the medians across each of the experimental conditions for each outcome measure is presented in Figure 1. All analyses were conducted using the open-source platform R (R Core Team, 2015).

To replicate the factor structure of the CWB scale, a CFA was conducted in R using the Lavaan method. The fit indices of the one-factor solution were poor ($\chi^2 = 2{,}755.12$, df = 275, $p < 0.001$; RMSEA = 0.16, 90% CI = 0.15–0.16; CFI = 0.70; TLI = 0.67) while the fit indices

Table I.
Intercorrelations among variables

		M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1.	Production deviance (T1)	1.35	0.69	*0.92*							
2.	Abusive behavior (T1)	1.41	0.55	0.75***	*0.96*						
3.	Withdrawal behavior (T1)	2.03	0.93	0.65***	0.66***	*0.91*					
4.	Recommendation to hire (T1)	4.27	1.27	−0.45***	−0.44***	−0.50***	*0.96*				
5.	Production deviance (T2)	2.11	1.50	0.27***	0.17**	0.11*	−0.21***	*0.97*			
6.	Abusive behavior (T2)	2.20	1.39	0.18***	0.23***	0.09	−0.18***	0.84***	*0.99*		
7.	Withdrawal behavior (T2)	3.26	1.53	0.16**	0.10	0.22***	−0.20***	0.77***	0.77***	*0.96*	
8.	Recommendation to hire (T2)	3.30	1.51	−0.22***	−0.15**	−0.20***	0.48***	−0.65***	−0.67***	−0.77***	*0.98*

Notes: $n = 354$. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p <$ 0.001

	Production deviance				Abuse against others				Withdrawal behavior				Hiring recommendation			
	Male		Female		Male		Female		Male		Female		Male		Female	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Before SNW																
Professional																
Qualified	1.36	0.58	1.71	1.11	1.48	0.48	1.49	0.73	2.33	1.04	2.33	1.10	3.58	1.27	3.66	1.37
Highly qualified	1.28	0.55	1.31	0.72	1.39	0.43	1.40	0.71	2.01	0.82	1.79	0.95	4.68	0.83	4.70	1.17
Unprofessional																
Qualified	1.56	0.85	1.27	0.59	1.49	0.63	1.38	0.52	2.39	1.05	1.98	0.90	3.65	1.36	3.97	1.21
Highly qualified	1.24	0.45	1.20	0.46	1.43	0.47	1.24	0.32	1.87	0.64	1.76	0.71	4.78	1.12	4.79	0.97
After SNW																
Professional																
Qualified	1.42	0.62	1.54	0.80	1.43	0.58	1.51	0.68	2.39	1.09	2.65	1.02	3.75	1.07	3.66	1.30
Highly qualified	1.29	0.52	1.29	0.61	1.38	0.41	1.38	0.66	2.23	0.91	1.86	0.69	4.55	0.99	4.62	1.17
Unprofessional																
Qualified	3.48	1.72	2.83	1.74	3.53	1.58	2.76	1.32	4.79	1.21	4.09	1.45	1.75	0.87	2.43	1.26
Highly qualified	2.81	1.71	2.15	1.55	3.14	1.56	2.31	1.37	4.26	1.34	3.70	1.28	2.52	1.19	3.10	1.35

Table II.
Means and standard deviations by condition

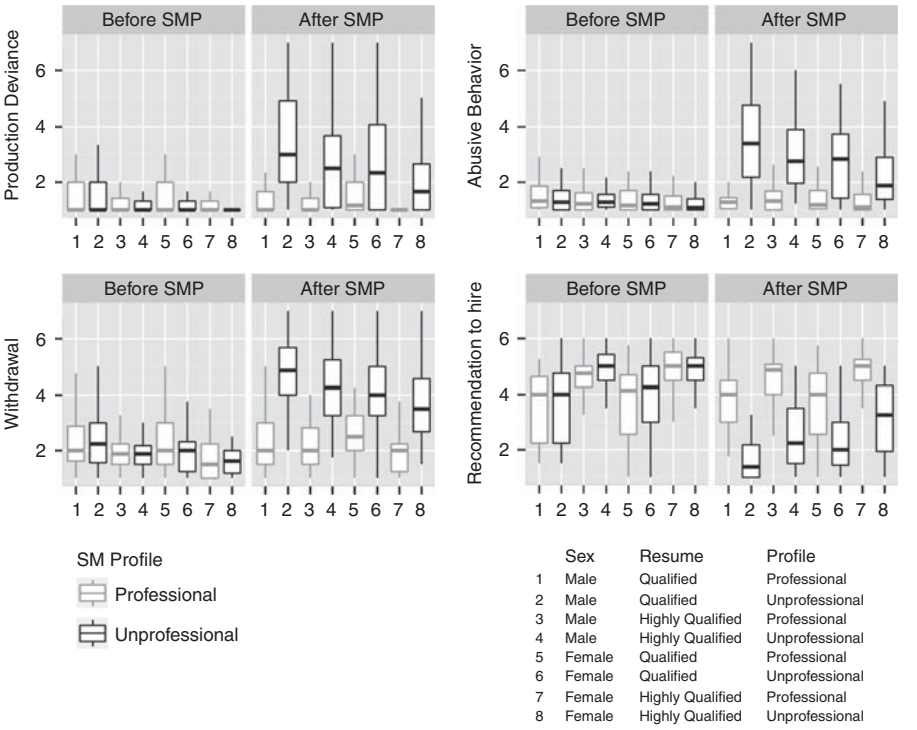

Figure 1.
Plots of medians

of the three-factor solution were only slightly better ($\chi^2 = 1{,}873.44$, df = 272, $p < 0.001$; RMSEA = 0.13, 90% CI = 0.12–0.13; CFI = 0.80; TLI = 0.78).

We analyzed our hypotheses using four separate repeated-measures MANOVAs. For each MANOVA, the independent variables were applicant sex, applicant resume quality, applicant SNW content and time (time 1 = before viewing SNW content, time 2 = after viewing SNW content) and the dependent variables were the before SNW and after SNW ratings of each of the outcome of interest: ratings of likelihood to engage in production deviance, abuse against others, withdrawal and likelihood to recommend hiring, respectively. Thus, the dependent variables of interest for *H1a* were ratings of likelihood to engage in production deviance before seeing the applicant's SNW content and ratings of likelihood to engage in production deviance after seeing the applicant's SNW, and the dependent variables of interest for *H1b* were the corresponding ratings related to abuse against others, and so on.

This MANOVA-based approach uses an unstructured variance-covariance matrix, allowing the mean differences between occasions (before/after viewing SNW content) to be tested more precisely. Therefore, the test statistic and associated *p*-values will be as accurate as possible (Hoffman, 2015). In our results, we report the Pillai's Trace (V) test statistic; application of other multivariate tests (Wilks' Λ, Hotelling-Lawley, Roy's greatest root) did not alter the inferences drawn from the analyses. We also explored the interaction by plotting the means of the outcome variable in each condition (see Figure 2).

Rather than employing the traditional approach of following up significant MANOVA results with multiple ANOVAs, we instead employed relative importance analysis (LeBreton and Tonidandel, 2008) in two ways. First, we focused on the independent variables. We calculated univariate relative weights for each independent variable on each

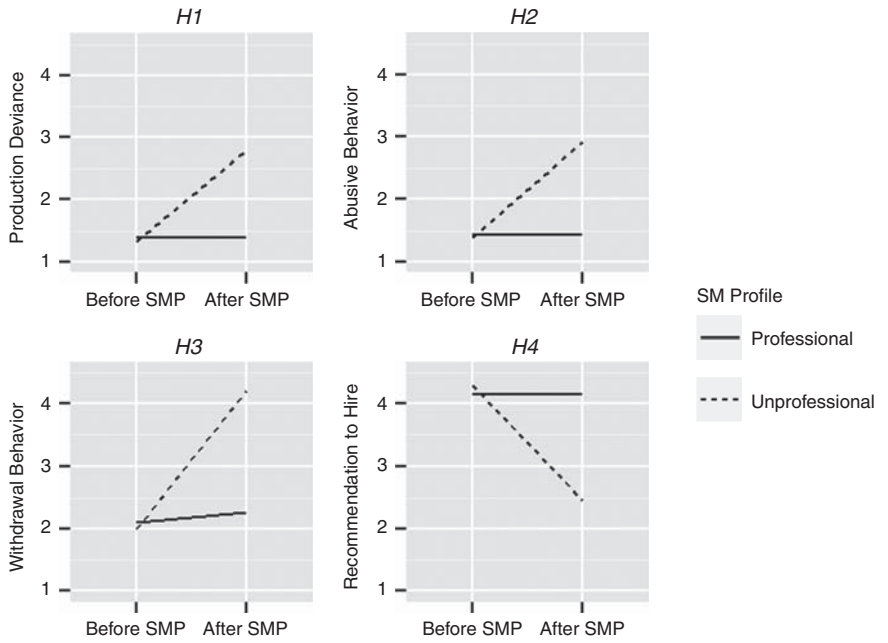

Figure 2.
Plots of interactions

dependent variable (before SNW, after SNW), and then we calculated multivariate relative weights for each independent variable. Second, we focused on the dependent variables by calculating relative weights following the procedure described in Tonidandel and LeBreton (2013). This technique results in the calculation of relative weights that may be used to gain a fuller understanding of the relative contribution of each dependent variable to the overall multivariate effect (Tonidandel and LeBreton, 2013). It is particularly relevant in cases like those in our study in which the dependent variables are repeated-measures and thus highly likely to be correlated (Huberty and Morris, 1989; LeBreton and Tonidandel, 2008).

The results of the relative importance analyses appear in Table III. The univariate relative weights sum to the model R^2, and the multivariate relative weights sum to P^2_{YX}, which is a multivariate analog to univariate R^2. The rescaled multivariate relative weights were calculated by dividing the raw multivariate relative weight by the total P^2_{YX}, and should be interpreted as the percentage of total multivariate criterion variance accounted for by the predictor (LeBreton and Tonidandel, 2008). To quantify the significance of these weights, we calculated bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals (Tonidandel *et al.*, 2009). The multivariate relative weights provide additional information about the relative contribution of each dependent variable to the overall multivariate effect. In every case for *H1a–H1d*, examining these relative weights reveals that viewing the SNW content contributed considerably more to the overall multivariate effect than did the ratings prior to viewing the SNW content.

There was a significant effect of viewing the SNW content on the rating of expected production deviance, V (Pillai's Trace) = 0.27, F(1, 346) = 126.8, $p < 0.001$. Viewing the SNW content had a multivariate relative weight of 0.131, 95% CI [0.10, 0.16], and a rescaled relative weight of 0.845, thereby accounting for just over 84 percent of the total predicted multivariate criterion variance. Furthermore, examining the confidence interval data suggests that this is a significant effect (range does not include 0) and that SNW content was significantly different from sex and resume quality, neither of which had a significant

	Independent variables					Dependent variables	
	Sex	Resume	SNW	R^2	P^2_{YX}	Time 1	Time 2
Production deviance (H1)							
Univariate relative weights (Y_1)[a]	0.000	0.024	–	0.024	–		
Univariate relative weights (Y_2)[a]	0.011	0.022[d]	0.222[e]	0.255	–		
Multivariate relative weights[b]	0.006	0.018[d]	0.131[e]	–	0.155	0.037	0.273
Rescaled multivariate relative weights[c]	0.039	0.116	0.845	–	–		
Abuse against others (H2)							
Univariate relative weights (Y_1)[a]	0.005	0.007	–	0.012	–		
Univariate relative weights (Y_2)[a]	0.021	0.009	0.291[e]	0.321	–		
Multivariate relative weights[b]	0.011	0.007	0.161[e]	–	0.179	0.022	0.336
Rescaled multivariate relative weights[c]	0.063	0.037	0.901	–	–		
Withdrawal behaviors (H3)							
Univariate relative weights (Y_1)[a]	0.010	0.046[d]	–	0.056	–		
Univariate relative weights (Y_2)[a]	0.015	0.024[d]	0.397[e]	0.436	–		
Multivariate relative weights[b]	0.011	0.029	0.219[e]	–	0.259	0.066	0.451
Rescaled multivariate relative weights[c]	0.041	0.113	0.846	–	–		
Recommendation to hire (H4)							
Univariate relative weights (Y_1)[a]	0.002	0.160[d]	–	0.162	–		
Univariate relative weights (Y_2)[a]	0.013	0.071[d]	0.320[e]	0.404	–		
Multivariate relative weights[b]	0.006	0.084[d]	0.229[e]	–	0.319	0.182	0.455
Rescaled multivariate relative weights[c]	0.020	0.262	0.718	–	–		

Notes: SNW, social networking profile. [a] Raw univariate relative weight; within rounding error, raw weights will sum to R^2. [b]Raw multivariate relative weight; within rounding error, raw weights will sum to P^2_{YX}; [c]Rescaled relative weight; within rounding error, rescaled weights will sum to 1. Therefore, each value represents the portion of predicted variance in the criterion variable attributed to the predictor. [d]The raw relative weight indicates that the variable explained a statistically significant amount of variance in the dependent variable because none of the 95 percent CIs (not shown) for the tests of significance contained zero. [e]The raw relative weight indicates that the variable explained a statistically significant amount of variance in the dependent variable and a statistically significant amount more variance than other IVs because none of the 95 percent CIs (not shown) for the tests of significance contained zero

Table III.
Results of relative weights analyses

multivariate effect. Finally, the pattern of interaction (SNW×Time) was as expected as well (Figure 2). These results provide support for *H1a*.

There was a significant effect of viewing the SNW content on the rating of expected abusive behavior, $V = 0.33$, $F(1, 346) = 170.8$, $p < 0.001$. Viewing the SNW content had a multivariate relative weight of 0.161, 95% CI [0.13, 0.19], and a rescaled relative weight of 0.901, thereby accounting for about 90 percent of the total predicted multivariate criterion variance. Furthermore, examining the confidence interval data suggests that this is a significant effect (range does not include 0) and that SNW content was significantly different from sex and resume quality, neither of which had a significant multivariate effect. Again, the pattern of interaction (SNW×Time) was as expected (Figure 2). These results provide support for *H1b*.

There was a significant effect of viewing the SNW content on the rating of expected withdrawal behavior, $V = 0.41$, $F(1, 346) = 235.6$, $p < 0.001$. Viewing the SNW content had a multivariate relative weight of 0.219, 95% CI [0.18, 0.25], and a rescaled relative weight of 0.846, thereby accounting for just over 84 percent of the total predicted multivariate criterion variance. Furthermore, examining the confidence interval data suggests that this is a significant effect (range does not include 0) and that SNW content was significantly different from sex and resume quality, neither of which had a significant multivariate effect. Once again, the pattern of the interaction was as expected (Figure 2). These results provide support for *H1c*.

There was a significant effect of viewing the SNW content on the recommendation to hire, $V = 0.42$, $F(1, 346) = 253.1$, $p < 0.001$. Viewing the SNW content had a multivariate relative weight of 0.229, 95% CI [0.19, 0.26], and a rescaled relative weight of 0.718, thereby accounting for almost 72 percent of the total predicted multivariate criterion variance. Furthermore, examining the confidence interval data suggests that this is a significant effect (range does not include 0) and that SNW content was significantly different from sex and resume quality. Resume quality, however, also had a significant multivariate effect, relative weight 0.084, 95% CI [0.05, 0.12], rescale relative weight 0.262. As was the case for each of the preceding hypotheses, the pattern of interaction was as expected (Figure 2). These results provide support for *H1d*.

H2 predicted that there would be an interaction between the sex of the ratee and their SNW content such that female ratees would be rated more negatively than their male counterparts for unprofessional SNW content. That is, female ratees with unprofessional SNW content would receive higher ratings of likelihood to engage in CWB and lower ratings of hiring recommendation. For every outcome variable except production deviance, the after SNW content ratings were significantly different for men and women, but in each case, the direction was the opposite of what was hypothesized (see Table IV). Thus, *H2* was not supported.

Discussion

In recent years, the popularity of social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram has made a great deal of personal information much more readily available than in times past. Employers have noticed; recent surveys suggest that more and more companies are using this sort of information to screen potential employees even though the legal status of this practice is still unfolding. Moreover, there is anecdotal evidence that one of the primary uses of this information is to weed out undesirable applicants.

As numerous studies suggest, negative information and extreme characteristics have a stronger effect on others' impressions of individuals than do neutral or positive characteristics (Baumeister *et al.*, 2001; Carlston, 1980; Fiske, 1980; Ito *et al.*, 1998; Kanouse and Hanson, 1972; Peeters and Czapinski, 1990; Skowronski and Carlston, 1989). Also, negative information has been found to have greater explanatory or diagnostic power than positive or neutral information (Taylor, 1991), so we postulated that extreme or negative behaviors in the form of unprofessional SNW content are viewed by recruiters as having

	Professional		Unprofessional		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	*t*-value
Production deviance (H5a)					
Male	1.35	0.57	3.11	1.74	−1.92
Female	1.40	0.71	2.47	1.67	
Abuse against others (H5b)					
Male	1.40	0.50	3.31	1.57	−2.39*
Female	1.44	0.67	2.53	1.36	
Withdrawal behaviors (H5c)					
Male	2.30	1.00	4.50	1.30	−2.68**
Female	2.21	0.93	3.88	1.37	
Recommendation to hire (H5d)					
Male	4.17	1.10	2.17	1.12	2.09*
Female	4.20	1.31	2.78	1.34	

Notes: *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$

Table IV. Mean results for interaction of sex and social network content

more diagnosticity. This results in integration biases and creates a positive–negative asymmetry effect in which negative information has a stronger effect on impressions than positive information (Bolster and Springbett, 1961).

Drawing from research on interactionist theories of sociology, the positive–negative asymmetry effect and gender-based double standards, we examined the effects SNW content has on recruiters' perceptions of job applicants. Our results tell a consistent story: when HR professionals encounter a job applicant's unprofessional SNW content, they subsequently evaluate that job applicant more negatively. Specifically, it appears that HR professionals anticipate such applicants are more likely to engage in CWBs. As a result, they are less likely to recommend the applicant be hired. We observed these relationships for both men and women and no matter the quality of resume evaluated. Interestingly, the absence of unprofessional SNW content does not appear to help applicants as those without such content did not receive higher post SNW ratings. The results, therefore, provide initial evidence supporting practitioner reports that employers use SNW content to eliminate applicants from consideration. The results are also consistent with predictions based on the positive–negative asymmetry, namely that negative information is of higher diagnostic value and is therefore weighted more heavily than neutral or even positive information.

The emphasis, then, appears to be on unprofessional information. This is potentially problematic for two reasons. First, if most employers who examine applicants' SNWs are looking for reasons to disqualify a candidate, they are primed to find it and are, therefore, more likely to draw negative inferences about a candidate than are others who view the profile with less-diagnostic intentions. Second, once observed, people tend to give negative information more weight. This can occur because it is more readily available in memory than is positive information and because it is believed to be more representative of one's true self, especially when it reveals non-compliance with social norms (Baumeister *et al.*, 2001; Kanar *et al.*, 2010).

It is unclear, however, that unprofessional SNW content is an accurate portrayal of the person, diagnostic of the person, whether or not the information is accurate or predictive of job performance. Prior research provides some evidence that SNWs may be virtual extensions of actual personality (e.g. Back *et al.*, 2010; Gosling *et al.*, 2008; Kluemper and Rosen, 2009; Stoughton *et al.*, 2013), which addresses the first concern to some degree. Our findings speak to the second and third concerns. We found that whether inferences about the person were accurate or not, experienced employers believe the information to be diagnostic. Those who viewed unprofessional SNWs penalized the applicant strongly when assessing their likelihood to engage in CWB and making a hiring recommendation. These results imply that, whether true or not, they believe these applicants would not perform well on the job or present some type of risk for the employer. Additionally, our results suggest that male and female applicants are evaluated differently based on unprofessional SNW content but in an unexpected way. Despite some evidence from sociology and psychology research that supports the conclusion that females tend to be judged more harshly than males for similar behavior related to sex and drinking, our results indicate that men were evaluated more harshly than women. While these results are contrary to research on double standards related to sex, we wonder if the way college-aged males are portrayed in the media influenced participants. Most male stereotypes are negative, and perhaps even more negative for college-aged males. The media often portrays male college students in the popular press and movies as being rude, drinking too much, using drugs, committing sexual assault, being irresponsible, etc., while college-aged females tend to be portrayed in a more positive light by the media. Perhaps this type of behavior was more salient for male applicants, and the raters in this study saw unprofessional SNW content as confirmation of these stereotypes. As a result, raters could have judged male applicants more harshly in comparison with female applicants because

such stereotypes for college-aged females do not tend to be proliferated, resulting in more leniency. We encourage future research to examine possible reasons for these findings as existing theory fails to account for them.

Furthermore, positive SNW content did not help candidates in the eyes of employers. Whether applicants had acceptable or excellent qualifications, the addition of a SNW containing positive information did not benefit them (i.e. improve perceptions). Rather, it seems to have served to confirm the assessment made after viewing the resume.

Limitations

While this study provides initial evidence that SNW content can change recruiters' evaluation of applicants, we acknowledge several potential limitations. Our experimental design aimed to closely approximate the process that recruiters use to incorporate SNW information into the applicant screening process, but in some instances we had to sacrifice a degree of realism for practicality and this contributed to the limitations of this study. One limitation of this study is that participants provided responses to the survey questions during a single session, and during that session they answered the same set of survey questions twice: once before viewing the applicant's SNW and once after viewing it. We dealt with the related non-independence issue by assessing the appropriateness of using multilevel modeling and using it where the data warranted it (described earlier in the paper), but repetition of the items still raises the potential for percept-percept inflation (Crampton and Wagner, 1994), which we cannot rule out. Another potential limitation is that our results may have come about as a result of demand characteristics (Schwab, 1999), whereby the survey items and experimental stimuli signaled to the participants the purpose of the research and, therefore, the desired responses to the survey items. Additionally, while we used established scales from the extant CWB literature, the fit statistics from the confirmatory factor analysis for the three-factor model were poor but better than that for the single-factor model. We examined dropping items to improve the fit, but there were no sound theoretical reasons for doing so and we elected to use the scales as previously validated in the literature despite the poor fit indices. Finally, it is possible that the first exposure to the CWB survey items created a priming effect (Chartrand and Bargh, 1996) such that participants who subsequently encountered the "unprofessional" SNW responded even more negatively than they otherwise would have had they not been primed by the initial exposure to the CWB items.

Future research

Our findings suggest several potential areas of future research. First, although the results indicate that hiring professionals presented with SNW content take it into consideration when evaluating job candidates, we do not know if their inferences are accurate. Therefore, it would be beneficial to augment our findings by obtaining supervisor and/or peer ratings of job performance, including task and citizenship behaviors in addition to CWBs, in order to assess whether or not SNW content is in fact related to on-the-job performance. We find it quite shocking that the use of social media in employee selection is so prevalent despite the absence of significant empirical research supporting this practice.

Second, it would be useful to know more about precisely how social media information is incorporated into hiring decisions. Our study provides evidence that the information does indeed have an effect, but the actual mechanisms through which the effect occurred was not revealed in our study. Third, it would also be useful to gain a better understanding of how employers use the various forms of information provided by the applicant and how employers respond to discrepant information.

At last, while our study examined specific types of unprofessional conduct presented on SNWs, it would be interesting to examine how different cue information (i.e. conduct and/or information) is perceived and used by employers. For example, are risqué photos viewed more favorably in comparison with comments containing profane language? Are photos and comments pertaining to alcohol abuse treated differently than aggressive or racial comments? Aside from Hoek *et al.* (2016), very few studies have examined why and how employers use cue information from social media. Future research should examine how different cue information impacts perceptions of other characteristics and hiring outcomes.

Conclusion

Overwhelmingly, anecdotal reports suggest that many employers use SNW information to eliminate job applicants from consideration. However, few empirical studies have examined exactly how SNW content influences HR recruiters' evaluation of job applicants. Our findings, which were obtained from an experimental study that closely resembles the job applicant evaluation process, suggest unprofessional SNW profiles negatively influence recruiter evaluations while professional SNW profile content had little to no effect on evaluations. These findings generally support popular press reports. However, the tendency for HR recruiters to use SNW profile information is problematic as there is little empirical evidence to support any relationship between SNW profile information and actual on-the-job behaviors. Further examination of these issues is important for both job applicants attempting to manage recruiter impressions and for organizations attempting to design valid selection procedures.

Based on our findings, HR recruiters should exercise caution when using SNW profile content to screen applicants and be cognizant that viewing such information triggers negativity and extremity biases (Skowronski and Carlston, 1989). Perhaps special training and pre-determined guides with weights associated with certain types of content similar to weighted application blanks would be beneficial if employers insist on utilizing SNW information in applicant screening.

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Corresponding author
John Bret Becton can be contacted at: bret.becton@louisiana.edu