# A digital job application reference: how do social media posts affect the recruitment process?

Mahmut Demir
*Department of Tourism Management, Faculty of Tourism, Isparta University of Applied Sciences, Isparta, Turkey, and*
Yusuf Günaydın
*School of Tourism, Final International University, Kyrenia, Cyprus*

## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to determine the influence of candidate employees' social media accounts (SMAs) on human resource (HR) professionals' hiring decisions as a job application reference in the tourism industry.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Using a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted in tourism businesses, such as hotels, travel agencies, restaurants, bars, and ground-handling service companies. In-depth, open-ended interviews with 16 questions were conducted to gather data face to face between October 15 and December 20, 2021, with 38 HR professionals. The research questions were analyzed using thematic analysis and discussed under three main themes.

**Findings** – The findings of this study showed that HR managers in the tourism industry generally prefer to examine candidates' SMAs rather than traditional references because they can quickly and cheaply screen many applicants.

**Originality/value** – Social media (SM) is increasingly used as a crucial channel in recruitment within organizations. This paper contributes by filling a gap in HR management, which empirical studies on the influence of job applicant's SMAs on recruiters' hiring decisions have been limited so far.

**Keywords** Social media, Employment, Social judgment, Recruitment process, Job reference, The tourism industry

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Information technologies and smart digital communication tools have become indispensable to human life in recent years. Accordingly, the time spent by people on social networks and platforms has increased while the content and number of shares have become uncontrollable. Shares on social media (SM) are not only limited to users' social lives but also reflects their work life. Managers and recruiters can therefore make preliminary assessments by examining SM posts of job applicants, those changing workplaces, or those seeking promotion to management. While this can benefit some, it can disadvantage others.

Researchers suggest different approaches to study attitudes and behaviors towards SM use. While some researchers argue that it is a social need (Krishen *et al.*, 2016; Wang *et al.*, 2012), others see it as a technology addiction (Longstreet and Brooks, 2017), a technological communication frenzy (Katambwe, 2020), and everyday behavior or sharing for various purposes. These include sharing locations, events, emotional situations, communication between individuals or groups, liking others' posts, commenting, starting discussions, questionnaires, ratings, promotions and marketing, announcements, and invitations (Branley and Covey, 2018; Quinn, 2016; Whiting *et al.*, 2019). People may even encounter unexpected reactions or threats while socializing through such posts. However, most people do not realize that their SM posts may be considered as a reference tool in job applications and that candidates may even be eliminated due to negative posts (Abril *et al.*, 2012; Lam, 2016; Ng *et al.*, 2016).

It is an acceptable reason business to examine job references for recruits, supervisors comprehensively, and middle-level managers to ensure person-organization fit, person-job fit, and person-work team fit. Job applicants' SM posts provide recruiters with important clues (Acikgoz and Bergman, 2016; Mehrotra and Mariam, 2020). Therefore, candidates' social media accounts (SMAs) can be considered digital job application references for managers to make the best recruitment decisions (Demir, 2015; Lam, 2016). Candidates' personal SMAs contain personal and business life content, political and religious views, clubs, unions, associations, political parties, attended events, photos, articles, etc. Inevitably, managers may use this information during recruitment.

The purpose of this study is to contribute to understanding the influence of SM posts on candidate judgment and hiring decisions of human resource (HR) professionals and recruiters, so far under researched issue. Given the limited credible data utilized by HR professionals, recruiters, and tourism business managers (Demir, 2015; Demir and Demir, 2019), the importance and value of hiring decisions, and the increasing use of SM searches of job applicants (Dalal *et al.*, 2015; Davidson *et al.*, 2011), the impact of SM posts on hiring decisions cannot be ignored. For this reason, this study presents evaluations and findings based on the posts of applicants in SM that can create negative impressions within the scope of social judgment theory (SJT).

## Literature review

SJT is based on the premise that a receiver's judgment of a persuasive message depends on one's position related to the topic (Sherif and Hovland, 1961; Sherif and Sherif, 1967). It is a process involving integrating data from a set of sources into a judgment about some behavior (Brehmer, 1988). Because according to SJT, a receiver does not have access to any direct information about the topics or behaviors. SJT has three categories of positions: the latitude of acceptance, rejection, and noncommitment (Sherif and Hovland, 1961; Sherif and Sherif, 1967). The basic principle of this theory is that individuals' prior attitudes and behaviors serve as evidence to judge whether they would accept or reject others' evaluations (Lee and Chun, 2016). When individuals perceive others' attitudes and behaviors similar to their own, their latitude of acceptance will increase; however, when attitudes and behaviors are opposite from their own, their latitude of rejection is likely to increase (Ledgerwood and Chaiken, 2007). Slight to moderate discrepancies between the receiver's beliefs and others' attitudes and behaviors will cause changes in perceptions, but huge discrepancies will not (Mahfouz, 2009). This means that when shared with the same issue, different people will derive different meanings from the messages and will react differently. These factors will cocreate different zones of positions one person can have toward an issue.

According to SJT (Sherif and Hovland, 1961), individuals' own beliefs or opinions play a vital role in their judgment toward others' attitudes and behaviors (Lee and Chun, 2016). For example, an HR professional or hiring manager is likelier not to have a favorable opinion about the applicants when they perceive an opposite religious belief, political opinion, ethical value, etc., in their SM posts. This situation reflects the latitude of rejection, including statements and ideas the receiver judges as objectionable or unacceptable. Individuals' latitudes of acceptance and rejection are heavily influenced by their beliefs and opinions on an issue (Mallard, 2010). A message in SM posts too discrepant from the receiver's (e.g. HR professional or hiring manager) attitude may fall within the latitude of rejection.

Social judgments related to job application references have been concerned with the attitudes and behaviors generated in a situation in which two persons with similar or divergent thoughts about a given philosophy of work life are required to work out agreements. An essential process in recruitment is evaluating the candidate's job references. A job application reference is provided by an individual who claims to know the candidate

well or a letter that offers a fair and adequate assessment of their character, work performance, technical skills, and job competencies (Yasar and Demir, 2019). The job application reference is thus valuable to job seekers and recruiters (Abel *et al.*, 2020; Kleiner and Doty-Navarro, 2001; Paunonen *et al.*, 1987), and one of the crucial ways for verifying the applicant's curriculum vitae. Previous studies (Abel *et al.*, 2020; Carranza and Pimkina, 2018; Crosby, 2009; McDonald and Thompson, 2016) show that the job application reference can reduce demographic information asymmetries, hiring costs and duration, and improve the employment prospects for more dynamic, enthusiastic, and higher ability candidates. These references are provided by a respected, competent, and experienced person from an academic, business, or social environment (e.g. consultants, former managers, employers, colleagues, etc.), recommended by the job applicant (Paunonen *et al.*, 1987; Varma *et al.*, 2006).

In recent years, the structure and characteristics of job application references have changed. Various factors, such as not recognizing the candidates' proposed references, prolonging the process, and increased costs, have forced HR managers to seek more effective, fast, and low-cost references (Gibson and Swift, 2011; Ladkin and Buhalis, 2016). One of the critical new sources reviewed by recruiters is candidates' SMAs. Posts in candidates' SMAs that do not comply with business policies and principles may result in negative judgments for recruiters. For example, HR professionals can quickly and cheaply cross-check the candidates' references against their SMAs, which are easily accessible and visible (Johnson *et al.*, 2020). SMAs can also be recorded, stored, and re-examined whenever necessary. Given these features, SMAs now play an essential role in recruitment (Gibson and Swift, 2011; Kwok and Muñiz, 2021; Stoughton *et al.*, 2015; Villeda *et al.*, 2019) as a job application reference tool. However, the most critical problem in this regard is the differences between the demographic characteristics and information of the candidates and the judgments of those evaluating them.

Businesses generally do not want their employees to reflect political, ideological, or religious thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors at work. This latitude of rejection contains the opinions an individual finds objectionable, according to SJT (Aghbolagh *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, their job application forms are compared with information in their SMAs regarding their opinions, comments, posts, and followings about various issues (Black *et al.*, 2016; Davison *et al.*, 2016). These evaluations enable recruiters to decide whether the candidate is suitable regarding professional knowledge, experience, ability, and socio-psychological suitability. Although the use of SM as a reference tool is increasing, many candidates are unaware of this. However, by using an SMA, candidates grant recruiters access to their physical image, voice, lifestyle, race, sex, age, family, friends, etc. This may lead to rejection of the candidate if they have posted misleading information (Abril *et al.*, 2012; Alexander *et al.*, 2019; Davison *et al.*, 2016), such as extravagant luxury lifestyle photos, comments with fake names, or using someone else's picture. For example, recruiters may be concerned if the candidate's current salary does not match their living standards as portrayed in their SM posts (Demir, 2015), and hence considered unsuitable for the organization. The receiver can have an acceptance or rejection zone judgment regarding individuals. While the latitude of the acceptance zone is where individuals place attitudes such as posts, contents, pictures, videos, etc. they consider acceptable (Lee and Chun, 2016; Sherif and Hovland, 1961), the latitude of the rejection zone is where individuals place these attitudes they consider unacceptable (Sherif and Sherif, 1967). Based on previous literature, Sung and Lee (2015) stated that the posts by individuals were effective in changing receivers' judgment positively or negatively.

Decision makers in HR selection and employment can examine SMAs to select the most suitable candidate and determine whether their characteristics might disrupt the workplace. Such attitudes and behaviors could include propagandizing for or sympathizing with criminal organizations, believing in ethnic discrimination, or sharing statements, pictures,

and activities that degrade the social values of society. According to SJT (Sherif and Sherif, 1967), these situations state the latitude of rejection positions that will be actively opposed. El Ouirdi *et al.* (2015) stated that such people tend to expose themselves on SM. Other negative behaviors, according to recruiters, may include immoral SM posts (Abel *et al.*, 2020; Quinn, 2016; Whiting *et al.*, 2019). In short, through such SM sharing, candidates can ensure that their job applications are rejected (El Ouirdi *et al.*, 2015; McDonald and Thompson, 2016; Whitaker *et al.*, 2017). SJT explains how individuals' perceptions serve as a reference point in judging others' attitudes and behaviors (Sung and Lee, 2015). Because negative information and posts are perceived as more informative, this can lead to a biased result (Skowronski and Carlston, 1989).

The increased use of SMAs as a reference can also prejudice hiring decisions due to gender, age, sexual, ethnic origin, lifestyle, health status, religion, beliefs, and political or ideological views. Nevertheless, SMAs have become an essential tool for HR professionals (Cho *et al.*, 2013; Davison *et al.*, 2016; Johnson *et al.*, 2020; Whitaker *et al.*, 2017). By providing more opportunities and tools to screen candidates' resumés, SMAs can help ensure the selection of better qualified and suitable applicants. SMA reference reviews allow recruiters to minimize errors in choosing the best applicants (Kwok and Muñiz, 2021). Moreover, HR professionals find examining SMA references much faster, easier, and more efficient than traditional methods (El Ouirdi *et al.*, 2015; Kwok and Muñiz, 2021; Ladkin and Buhalis, 2016; McDonald and Thompson, 2016). These SMAs can contain concrete decisions on an application that is rejected, and the decision maker may negatively judge the candidates. So, most decision-makers could doubtless find the attitudes and behavior on SMAs as unacceptable and place them in the latitude of rejection. As mentioned by Aghbolagh *et al.* (2020), these situations can be considered an indicator of the notion of latitude of acceptance from social judgment theory.

Previous studies (Black *et al.*, 2016; Demir, 2015; Madia, 2011; Villeda *et al.*, 2019) report that SMA is a comprehensive reference tool for verifying information provided in application forms. Accordingly, managers of tourism businesses who need detailed information, especially in job applications for management levels, do examine candidates' SMAs (Karnowski *et al.*, 2018; Ladkin and Buhalis, 2016). Traces on SMAs of their administrative and academic successes, membership in social clubs, work experience, professional certificates, social responsibility projects, and professional training provide essential information for HR managers (Abel *et al.*, 2020; Abril *et al.*, 2012). In fact, following respected institutions, businesses, groups, and individuals in SM is considered a positive reference for the candidate (Abel *et al.*, 2020; Carranza and Pimkina, 2018) and can create a favorable judgment (Cho *et al.*, 2013) for the HR manager in terms of the latitude of acceptance proposed by Sherif and Hovland (1961).

One of the most critical issues related to SMA is data confidence and careful preservation of applicants' privacy (Stoughton *et al.*, 2015). HR professionals need to ensure that they maintain a balance between the recruiter's investigations and candidate privacy. As Lam (2016) stated, decision-makers risk crossing the lines of discrimination, infringement on personal privacy and freedom or interference with candidates' concerted activities, attitudes and behavior that are protected by national law. Although SM allows recruiters to find information easily, it may be unethical to examine applicants' posts and SMA data (Gelinas *et al.*, 2017; Zide *et al.*, 2014). As Darragh (2012) notes, various factors can force HR professionals to commit ethical and legal violations when making hiring decisions based on SMA information. Although the information on applicants' SMAs can be helpful during recruitment, these could be abused because of applicants' ethical, legal, privacy, moral, and vilification concerns (Duffy *et al.*, 2017). Respect for privacy is grounded in the foundational norms of care for a person. It is vital given the personal information on SMA and the ease with which it can be accessed (Gelinas *et al.*, 2017). The decision-makers should obey the ethical

rules responsibly, even if the personal information has already been made widely available on SMA, by minimizing the situations of individuals suffering embarrassment, loss of dignity, or other harm due to the SMA recruitment process and methods (Backman and Hedenus, 2019; Gelinas *et al.*, 2017). Otherwise, positive or negative judgments may occur depending on the recruiters' beliefs and opinions within the scope of SJT.

The fit of employees with the organization and their colleagues is more critical for businesses in tourism than in other sectors. This is because tourism products and services are consumed at the same time and place of production, so tourism businesses cannot compensate for their employees' mistakes. Therefore, tourism managers are more careful in selecting employees. Employees' socio-psychological characteristics are also critical in tourism businesses that serve people with different demographic characteristics. Therefore, businesses need to reject unsuitable candidates by examining their SMAs in detail to reveal negative comments on issues like ethnic nationalism, racism, xenophobia, sexual discrimination, theft, drug use, or attending events or supporting such attitudes and behaviors (Abril *et al.*, 2012; Branley and Covey, 2018; Davison *et al.*, 2016; Quinn, 2016). In addition, many researchers (Borstorff *et al.*, 2007; Choi, 2018; Katambwe, 2020) claim that those who make such posts have psychological problems, which means they will inevitably reflect this in their work. In this process, it is vital for objective decisions so that recruiters do not make positive or negative social judgments due to the particular personal circumstances of the candidates in their SM posts. Although this information is not always accurate or reliable, tourism business managers have increasingly used SMAs to select suitable candidates (Yaşar and Demir, 2021).

Based on Social Judgment Theory, the present study focuses on three main research questions:

*RQ1.* Do HR professionals, recruiters, and tourism business managers examine candidates' SMAs in the recruitment process? If yes, what is the primary purpose of examining candidates' SMA during recruitment?

*RQ2.* What kind of information about the candidates is examined in SMA? What type of judgment can be made about the candidates by examining this information?

*RQ3.* Is SMA information of candidates effective in the judgments of managers in the recruitment process? If yes, which issues are more effective and how?

Thus, this study aims to determine whether tourism businesses use candidates' SMAs as job application references during recruitment and to reveal how this affects recruiters' hiring decisions. The findings will contribute to the literature and guide future studies. The findings have practical implications regarding how candidates' SMA information may affect recruiters' hiring decisions in tourism businesses, what information can be examined, and whether doing so is ethical or legal. The findings will contribute to the literature and guide future studies.

## Methodology
### Research design
There are few studies of how hotel businesses investigate candidates' SMAs during recruitment. Given that this issue is under-researched, a qualitative approach can provide a deeper examination of the research questions than a quantitative approach (Creswell, 2013). A qualitative approach enables researchers to achieve in-depth narrative findings by systematically exploring the respondents' evaluations (Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Oggionni and Kwok, 2018). It also creates more value on the sample's appropriateness and increases the data's depth and breadth (Kumar, 2005). The present study used interviews, with no constraints, except for taking notes, on respondents' responses, such as time, place, recording,

mandatory reply to questions, or demographic information. The study sampled diverse tourism businesses, such as hotels, travel agencies, restaurants and bars, and ground-handling service companies, to obtain deep and broad data.

*Data and sample*

Purposive sampling was used to select HR managers with decision-making authority and at least five years of experience in recruitment. Purposive sampling, widely used in qualitative research, involves the deliberate choice of respondents based on their characteristics and positions (Bernard, 2002). In-depth, semi-structured, open-ended interviews with 16 questions (see Appendix 2) were conducted to gather data. The questions were developed from the literature and tourism HR managers' insights. The questions allowed interviewees to express their opinions on examining SMAs during recruitment. The interviews were conducted face to face between October 15 and December 20, 2021, with 38 HR managers from the following types of tourism businesses: hotels (18), travel agencies (10), restaurants (8), and ground-handling companies (2) in Turkey (i.e. in the cities of Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Antalya and Muğla). The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 min. No audio recording was conducted to ensure the respondents' confidence and respect for their demands. There are two reasons for conducting the research qualitatively with a small sample. First, it was challenging to reach more participants due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Second, other department managers, supervisors, and HR employees would not provide enough information about examining candidates' SMAs since HR managers are recruited. During each interview, the participants were asked which SMAs they studied. However, even within the scope of the research, some SM providers did not allow the use of their names, claiming that it would create a negative perception. Marshall (1996) stated that researchers need to be flexible in qualitative research for sampling and that the number of participants is one that sufficiently responds to the research question. Although Creswell (2013) has suggested that for phenomenology, between 5 and 25 interviews are appropriate, the interviews were conducted with 38 HR participants. Although theoretical saturation was achieved after different participants for each research question (e.g. while the earliest response saturation was reached after 7th participants for research question 1.2 the latest one was after 31st participants for research question 2.2 in Appendix 2).

*Data analysis*

Responses to the semi-structured questions were analyzed using thematic analysis. This requires researchers to thoroughly review the literature and gather current data for different codes. In this study, the codes, based on themes and sub-themes, were developed from Braun and Clarke (2006) and Gavin (2008). The interview data were analyzed by following the following steps (Braun and Clarke, 2006): (1) familiarization with the data; (2) assigning preliminary codes to the data to describe the content; (3) searching for patterns or themes in codes across interviews; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; (6) producing the report. A qualitative thematic method was used to analyze the data systematically (see Table 1). The thematic system approach was designed to identify, code, and group the data under themes, sub-themes, titles, and contents. To ensure the accuracy and reliability of the data, the researcher and two assistants transcribed information verbatim during the interviews. The transcription document was cross-checked immediately within an hour after each interview. When new interviews produced no further information, it was understood that the data was saturated.

**Results**

All interviewees in this study were HR managers or business owners responsible for recruitment. As can be seen from Table 2 (see Appendix 1 for details), the respondents were mostly HRMs

| Main theme | Sub-theme | Subject title |
|---|---|---|
| Examining SMAs | Organization-person fit | Legal situations |
| | | Ethical behavior |
| | | Socio-psychological character |
| | Reason for examining SMAs | Reducing hiring cost |
| | | Using time effectively |
| | | Selecting right employee |
| | Roles applied to | All employees |
| | | Supervisor |
| | | Mid-level managers |
| Types of information examined in SMAs | Posts | Articles |
| | | Pictures |
| | | Recordings |
| | | Sounds |
| | Contacts | Followings |
| | | Followers |
| | Comments | Type (critical, constructive, etc.) |
| | | Content |
| | | Language and style |
| | Contents of posts, contacts, and comments | Visual shares |
| | | Political posts |
| | | Religious posts |
| | | Moral posts |
| | | Ethnic shares |
| | | Illegal posts |
| | | Sexual posts |
| Hiring decisions | Reliability of information as a reference | Affecting decisions |
| | Validity of information as a reference | Forming ideas for decisions |
| | | Requiring further research for decisions |

**Table 1.**
Themes and subject
titles of the study

| Characteristics | | $n$ | Percent (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Age | 21–30 | 7 | 18.4 |
| | 31–40 | 25 | 65.8 |
| | 41–50 | 6 | 15.8 |
| Gender | Female | 16 | 42.1 |
| | Male | 22 | 57.9 |
| Experience in HRM (years) | 6–10 | 32 | 84.2 |
| | 11–15 | 4 | 10.5 |
| | 16–20 | 2 | 5.3 |
| Experience in the tourism industry (years) | 6–10 | 14 | 36.8 |
| | 11–15 | 11 | 28.9 |
| | 16–20 | 9 | 23.7 |
| | 21–25 | 3 | 7.9 |
| | 26–30 | 1 | 2.6 |
| Role | HRM | 31 | 81.6 |
| | Owner and HRM | 7 | 18.4 |
| Sub-sectors in the tourism industry | Hotel | 18 | 47.4 |
| | TA | 10 | 26.3 |
| | R&B | 8 | 21.1 |
| | GHSC | 2 | 5.3 |

**Table 2.**
The characteristics of
respondents

(81.6%), followed by business owners (18.4%). The majority (65.8%) were aged 31–40 years old, while there was an approximately even balance between males (57.9%) and females (42.1%). All respondents had over five years of experience in an HRM role in the tourism industry. Almost half (47.4%) were representatives of hotels, while the others worked in travel agencies (26.3%), restaurants and bars (21.1%), or ground handling service companies (5.3%).

To overcome the difficulties of time constraints and hiring costs and to identify qualified young talents (Yasar and Demir, 2019), most tourism businesses have moved away from traditional job applicant references (academic references, former managers, colleagues, etc.). Instead, they have turned to alternative sources, such as candidates' SMAs. One of the most important reasons is that people use SM effectively. SM usage has become one of the most popular online activities, with over 3.6 billion people (approximately 50% of the world's population) using SM in 2020 (Tankovska, 2021). Such figures explain why tourism businesses use SM data in recruitment.

### RQ1. Do HR professionals, recruiters, and tourism business managers examine candidates' SMAs in the recruitment process? If yes, what is the primary purpose of examining candidates' SMA during recruitment?

The first main theme of the research was reflected in the opening interview question: "Do you examine the SMAs of candidates during recruitment?". Almost all respondents (90%) put forward many reasons for checking candidates' SMAs. While 89.5% of HR managers required a job applicant reference (JAR) on SMA, 5.25% considered this unethical and 5.25% considered it illegal. However, all participants argued that if candidates' SMAs were publicly accessible, it was acceptable for anyone to view them. Three main reasons for this recent trend were reducing recruitment costs, using time effectively for employee selection, and identifying the best candidates. Some respondents stated that as the number of applications increases, the recruitment costs also increase. For example, *"There are many job applications that increase hiring costs" (HRM22), "Recruitment costs are constantly increasing according to the job application" (HRM1, HRM19), "Interviews with candidates and contact with their references to evaluate them, communication costs (HRM5), paperwork (HRM8), and stationery costs, etc. (HRM29) are quite high"*. However, in summary, as can be seen in the following statements, a few respondents have indicated that too many job applications require a lot of time; *"We need to spend a lot of time as there are so many job applications" (HRM3), "There is no time for other work when there are huge job applications" (HRM6, HRM11), "Too many job applications, unfortunately not that much time" (HRM35), "A lot of job applications mean a lot of time" (HRM20, HRM31), "Time is minimal, we have to evaluate quickly" (HRM28)*. In addition, almost all participants have argued that the primary purpose of examining candidates' SMAs is to create person-organization and person-job fit. Specifically, some participants (HRM2, HRM7, HRM10, HRM23, HRM27, HRM33, HRM37, HRM38) have emphasized person-organization fit, while others (e.g. HRM5, HRM13, HRM24, HRM29, HRM31, HRM34) have emphasized person-job fit. But others indiscriminately have emphasized the fit of both. However, the explanation of HRM15 is in a way that summarizes the opinions of all participants on this issue. For example, *"We must investigate the employee candidates in detail to ensure the person-organization fit. If we cannot achieve this initially, difficult situations may occur later. Therefore, it is important to find the best-fitting employee for the business"*. This issue may be a more critical justification for increasing employee productivity, improving organizational climate, and establishing working life quality in tourism businesses.

Businesses have different HR politics and use alternative recruitment processes, whether formal or informal, to recruit talented and creative employees (Marchington and Wilkinson, 2012; Melanthiou *et al.*, 2015). As in other sectors, tourism businesses also try to find the best

employees by using all available recruitment tools to procure employees for different roles. The participants revealed that more comprehensive investigations are conducted for managerial applicants. The majority (57.9%) emphasized that executive candidates' leadership, human relations, and socio-cultural characteristics are as important as their professional experience. While some (36.8%) considered JAR a vital tool for examining all candidates, they complained about obstacles, such as inaccurate information and inaccessible or fake SMAs. HRM9, HRM14, and HRM28 stated that they mostly used JAR for recruiting supervisors. They also noted that most of the information on candidate application forms does not match data from SMAs.

*RQ2: What kind of information about the candidates is examined in SMA? What type of judgment can be made about the candidates by examining this information?*
The informants reported that they benefit from analyzing job applicant SMAs. In particular, SMAs are examined in terms of post, followers and followings, and comments. Various unfavorable posts were identified that could cause discomfort and have unpleasant consequences for customers, tour operators, fellow employees, and stakeholders. These included humiliating ethnic groups, supporting terrorist movements, behaviors breaching social norms, or using inappropriate pictures. HR managers may infer that these posts present a risk, though this can be a weak or unwarranted inference. Berger and Zickar (2016) found that the candidates with positive posts on their SMA profiles are rated as having better perceptions than candidates with negative profiles. Thus, a recruiter or hotel HR manager who sees such posts may decide not to interview or hire a candidate in case their behaviors could damage the organization.

According to respondents, SM posts can directly create a hostile work environment. Based on the thoughts of *"good people share good things"*, some respondents stated that the visual posts reflect the socio-psychological characteristics of the individual. Some reported that *"sexually explicit images" (HRM2, HRM7), "drunken posts" (HRM9, HRM17), "passion for illegal gambling" (HRM6), "attitudes and behaviors that encourage theft" (HRM11, HRM18), and "videos promoting drugs use"* (HRM22, HRM27, HRM32, HRM35) made candidates less employable in tourism businesses. The following statement of HRM23 on this subject seemed to reflect the other participants' thoughts: *"Alcoholic and sexual posts reflect the socio-psychological characteristics of the individual. Those who post this kind of posting are likely to be involved in harassment in the tourism sector."* In this case, as moving out of the latitude of non-commitment, the second border, which contains the entering the latitude of rejection, is reached.

Another issue that recruiters examine is candidates' political, religious, and ethnic posts on SMA. According to SJT, each position can be categorized into one of three zones: the latitude of acceptance, the latitude of non-commitment, or the latitude of rejection. Decision-makers can be positively or negatively affected by knowing that candidates post the same political, religious, or ethnic comments. Regarding the adverse effects on recruitment, HRM4, HRM12, HRM24, and HRM38 have commented that the political posts reflect the individual's ideological characteristics that try to impose their ideas to influence others. In contrast, HRM19, HRM28, and HRM32 have stated that religious posts reflect the individual's socio-cultural characteristics, which may be prejudiced against those who do not belong to their religious views. However, HRM10, HRM21, and HRM33 pointed out that ethnic posts, which can cause conflicts within the business, make it difficult for the individual to relate and communicate with others. Moreover, HRM1, HRM13, HRM20, HRM30, and HRM37 emphasized that peoples' immoral posts on SMA show the characterless of the individual, and those who are morally weak can harm the whole organization.

One issue that recruiters, HR managers, and general managers in the tourism industry research are whether candidates' posts praise terrorist organizations or support their actions, or not. Nearly two-thirds of participants (65.8%) stated that those who support terrorist activities and sympathize with them, could pose a threat to the guests, employees, and management. It is crucial to determine in advance who makes such posts. The respondents stressed how important this issue was in the tourism sector. According to them, many bad habits can be changed, but there is no acceptable justification for pro-terrorism attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, by evaluating candidates from such posts on SMA, tourism businesses can both avoid hiring potentially harmful employees and avoid legal responsibility for their attitudes and behavior. How decision-makers judge is the critical first step in the recruiting process. Judgments of rejection make employee selection extremely difficult. According to SJT, the posts on SMA are important for judgments of non-commitment and acceptance that offer the only chance for change.

Recruiters focus on not only the candidates' posts but also their interaction with other SM users through comments, followers, and followings. Many of the recruiters (63.2%) who evaluate candidates by screening their SMAs believed that their comments on social issues, such as terrorist incidents, ethnic conflicts, freedom of religion and belief, and demographic discrimination, were necessary for the organizational climate and quality of working life. Thus, this process is essential while recruiting individual employees and ensures that the organization's future is based on solid foundations. However, whether this is an ethical violation or not is an issue that needs to be discussed separately.

Many comments by candidates in their SMAs can prevent their recruitment due to the comments' types, amount, style, purpose, and content. The participants titled HRM6, HRM13, HRM22, and HRM31 have mentioned that the individuals commenting on every subject shows that they are wasting their time, distracting those around them, and enjoying the discussion environment. HRM5, HRM27, HRM29, and HRM34 have believed that someone who constantly comments in a slang, obscene, and derogatory style is low-cultured and the language and style used in the comments reflect the socio-cultural characteristics of the individual. These participants argue that people with such characteristics do not fit for their businesses. On the other hand, HRM11, HRM14, HRM25, HRM30, and HRM36 have made statements similar to HRM23's comment that *"Someone who makes provocative comments to other people can be dangerous for the health of the organization. Threatening comments indicate that the individual's mental health is impaired".*

Recruiters or HR managers research the demographic profile of candidates' followings and followers to find out which societies they belong to. First of all, it should be noted that this is an unethical approach. HRM1, HRM3, HRM19, HRM20, HRM30, HRM37 and HRM38 have stated that the first reason is to determine whether they belong to any criminal organizations. HRM38 has noted this situation more clearly: *"The employee following illegal individuals or groups may be harmful to customers and other employees in the business".* In addition, decision-makers do not want to employ too many employees who belong to the same organization, community, or party, even if it is legal. Some reasons were suggested: *"Employees who are members of the same community ask for leave at the same time" (HRM4), "prefer to work in the same team" (HRM16), "even threaten to resign en masse" (HRM24, HRM33), "Employees can be guided by the social communities they are members of" (HRM32), "Conflicts between the groups, clubs, associations, etc. that they are members of disturbs employees' peace of mind"* (HRM27).

*RQ3. Is SMA information of candidates effective in the judgments of managers in the recruitment process? If yes, which issues are more effective and how?*
Most HR managers in tourism businesses now consult SMAs without candidates' awareness when hiring decisions. However, recruiters should behave legally and ethically when doing so

since the information from SMAs can be inappropriate for hiring decisions because it may be unreliable or invalid.

SMAs can help identify and assess hiring decisions' principles (Cortina and Luchman, 2013). However, recruiters are cautious about using SMA data to make employment decisions because they can bias the process. Recruiters should verify information from different sources before using it in hiring decisions. When using SMA posts, recruiters need to ensure that their decisions are not unduly influenced by information that may result in bias. As noted by several respondents, the primary purpose of examining the SMA is to select the right employee suitable for the organization and the job. To explain the specific views of some participants on this issue; *"It is very important to have all the information about them to choose the right employees. For this, the candidates' SMA is the easiest source of information"* (HRM7), *"All data sources should be reliable in order not to make a wrong decision on this matter. Candidates' SMA is one of these sources. But can you trust it?"* (HRM18), *"All of the candidates' information resources for the right employee are valuable to us. Including the SMA."* (HRM27), and *"We have to rely on the information in the candidates' SMA. Good or bad, don't they provide all the information themselves?"* (HRM31). Similarly, HRM19, HRM23, and HRM37 have stated that they recruit by checking candidates' SMA information and making a favorable decision if the information on the job application forms matches the SMA information. These statements are within the latitude of acceptance which contains all the positions on a specific topic that are found suitable. For many decision-makers, these statements are probably acceptable and would fall into their latitude of acceptance.

Most recruiters have reported that they sometimes reject job applicants due to finding illegal or unethical posts, comments, etc., on SMAs. Some of the participants' views on this issue are as follows; *"Some candidates were directly eliminated for their laudatory comments on the illegal organizations. It is not possible to accept them in the business"* (HRM5), *"Our customers are from different nationalities. We do not approve of racist posts against any nationality"* (HRM11), *"For the health and safety of our customers, we have to access all kinds of information about candidate employees"* (HRM21), *"We collect all kinds of information in recruitment for the safety of life and property of our customers and all our employees, and the peace of the working environment"* HRM30), *"Some of the candidates who were rejected shared how to steal on social media. Such people can be very risky for tourism facilities"* (HRM8), *"We specifically examine those who have attitudes and behaviors such as theft, pickpocketing, etc."* (HRM17), *"We rejected the job application because we did not find it right for someone who humiliates women with sexual content to work in hotels"* (HRM9); *"Other issues to be aware of were comments that raised suspicions about illegal activity, racism, or gender discrimination"* (HRM4) and *"gender discrimination and misogyny are unacceptable"* (HRM26).

Thus, HR professionals and recruiters use information derived from candidates' SMAs when making employment decisions in tourism businesses. In particular, they focus on posts, comments, followings, and followers, as noted in the literature (Berger and Zickar, 2016; Black *et al.*, 2016; Cortina and Luchman, 2013; Kwok and Muñiz, 2021; Marchington and Wilkinson, 2012; Melanthiou *et al.*, 2015). For recruiters, candidates' SMAs positively or negatively impact hiring decisions depending on the content. The more important thing in this regard is, as Lam (2016) points out, that a more ethically controversial dilemma is whether the SMA recruitment approach is discriminatory.

## Discussion

This study identified three primary purposes for recruiters to use SMAs as a job application reference in the tourism industry: finding the right employees, reducing recruitment costs, and using time effectively. HR managers evaluate candidates for person-organization fit in terms of criteria such as their social and psychological status, demographic characteristics,

professional experience, and competencies (Berger and Zickar, 2016; Brown and Vaughn, 2011; Doherty, 2010; Galanaki, 2002; Melanthiou *et al.*, 2015). Sometimes the information obtained from references suggested by the candidate in their job application form or the previous business manager may not satisfy the recruiting HR manager. Therefore, candidates' SMAs are considered informal resources to check these references. However, in this case, the positive or negative judgments of the recruiters about the candidate's shares and information on SM can be effective. The findings and results are revealed according to the SJT. In the recruitment process, the existing judgments with a candidate's posts on SMA influence decision-makers more than the logic or solidity of an idea itself.

The references specified by the candidate in the job application form do not always act objectively and may present the candidate over-favorably to help them get the job. It is not easy to check the impartiality of such references. It is also doubtful whether a candidate's former managers can provide an objective assessment. The SJT suggests that, in addition to having one's own opinion and thoughts, you also have a range in order to determine the acceptance or rejection latitude in the views of the references. While a candidate's SMA can be helpful, it may also not reflect the truth. In such cases, the work of HR managers can become challenging and complex in terms of time and cost (Alexander *et al.*, 2019; Ladkin and Buhalis, 2016; Landers and Schmidt, 2016). Generally, however, the information, shares, and activities of candidates in SMAs, and the people or groups they interact with, can lead to prejudice for HR managers in recruitment decisions because posts in SM are critical information that recruiters will find difficult to ignore.

The findings of this study showed that HR managers in tourism businesses generally prefer to examine candidates' SMAs rather than traditional references because they can quickly and cheaply screen many applicants. Checking job application references against SMAs are now part of online recruiting because of a range of benefits, such as reducing costs (Breaugh, 2008), increasing effectiveness (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010), finding the right employees (Tessema *et al.*, 2020), saving time on information processing (Doherty, 2010), and improving decisions with the qualities of applicants. The purpose of collecting and processing of personal data in SMA is to manage recruiting. The lawfulness of the processing of personal data is to simplify and facilitate recruitment. However, using candidates' data shared in SMA without permission and even for other purposes is considered unethical attitudes and behaviors.

The primary goal of recruitment is to hire the right and best employees by screening their SMAs based on qualifications and resumés. In tourism, hiring the right employee is pivotal to person-organization fit, productivity, service quality, competition, and success. Having the right employees helps an organization to grow. The challenge of matching organizational expectations with employee performance can be overcome by recruiting the right type of employee competence (Reilly, 2018). Given that the right employee for an organization is one with moral character and qualifications, researchers suggest that SMAs are an efficient tool for hiring decisions (Breaugh, 2008; Brien, 2004; Demir, 2015; Melanthiou *et al.*, 2015; Pekkala *et al.*, 2022). According to Yoon Kin Tong and Sivanand (2005), traditional recruitment could not meet industry requirements, especially in selecting the right candidate quickly at the right time, because it had to deal with many processes. All tools used for recruitment by tourism businesses are designed to select the right person for the organization.

Specific critical SMA data examined by recruiters, such as cultural values and demographic information, may influence hiring decisions, consciously or unconsciously, due to prejudice. This is because SM posts and interactions are factors in the hiring process that are generally at the discretion of HR professionals. Previous research has shown how SMA data can affect recruitment decisions (Brown and Vaughn, 2011; El Ouirdi *et al.*, 2015; Kwok and Muñiz, 2021; Stoughton *et al.*, 2015). Thus, HR professionals try to accurately determine whether a candidate possesses the required qualifications and job skills and how

they interact with followers and followings. SMA information about candidates may reinforce a recruiter's decision to hire or not. Such information may even guide how they justify rational selection decisions. However, there is a danger that the hiring decision is based on fake, inaccurate, or outdated information. Recruiters' reliance on SM posts believes that their intuitive weighting of the information will result in better hires; on the contrary, using unverified information can result in unreasonable hiring decisions (Dalal *et al.*, 2015).

In common with other research (Gelinas *et al.*, 2017; Ladkin and Buhalis, 2016; Melanthiou *et al.*, 2015), the present study revealed various ethical issues facing HR professionals when examining SMAs. Providing organization-person fit has forced how these ethical dilemmas intersect with finding the right employees, reducing recruiting costs, and using time effectively when examining SMAs. Despite these advantages, some studies suggest that examining such information may not be ethical even if it is legal (Abel *et al.*, 2020; Landers and Schmidt, 2016; Zide *et al.*, 2014). Examining candidates' SMAs can improve both employee and business performance. However, deciding based on the SMA of a candidate is an unethical approach, and it is within the scope of a privacy violation that uses someone's personal information without consent. In summary, there are limited rules to guide HR professionals in dealing with the ethical dilemmas of using SMAs in hiring. Despite this, HR managers have to work more meticulously and diligently when choosing tourism employees to serve consumers of different nationalities and cultures.

*Theoretical implications*
This study has several significant theoretical implications for the tourism literature. This is the first study (*until the research date*) investigating the use of job applicants' SMAs as digital references. The findings contrast with previous research into SMAs and demonstrate the need for HR professionals to focus on unethical or illegal posts, comments, and followings while simultaneously considering accurate and satisfying SM content. While many recruitment studies through SM information (Kwok and Muñiz, 2021; Ladkin and Buhalis, 2016), no study has investigated SM as an applicant reference in the tourism industry. As this study reveals, the actual consequences of examining SMAs as a digital reference may be more varied and debatable than advertising jobs through SM.

This study also examined the legal and ethical implications of using SMA data. These legal and ethical consequences reflect corporate values and norms and the attitudes and behaviors of recruiters. It remains unclear how applicants' SMAs should be used procedurally in hiring decisions (Landers and Schmidt, 2016; Pekkala *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, it is essential to protect the privacy of personal information and the characteristics and qualifications of candidates in recruitment decisions (Tan and Demir, 2018). The hiring process may be considered an invasion of privacy. Therefore, HR managers should consider legal and ethical rules while examining applicants' SMA data, such as posts, comments, and followings.

This study identified three main reasons recruiters used SMA information as an applicant reference: reducing costs, saving time, and hiring the right employees. Recruitment costs are a significant burden for tourism businesses, including all the hiring expenses from job posting to joining the organization. Several studies have suggested that SM is more cost-effective than traditional recruitment methods (Alexander *et al.*, 2019; Breaugh, 2008; Doherty, 2010). As with any recruitment strategy, recruitment costs in tourism businesses depend on factors like job posting, contact expenses, the population interviewed, and examining references. Therefore, reducing these costs is important for businesses. Nevertheless, SM may not always be the most cost-effective tool for examining references. Because the targeted reliable and valid information is inaccessible, the transactions must be repeated, and each new transaction increases recruitment costs.

Previous studies have found consequences similar to the present study, which identified the right employees for businesses as having the current job requirements and suitable for the organizational structure (Berger and Zickar, 2016; Breaugh, 2008; Brown and Vaughn, 2011; Melanthiou *et al.*, 2015; Ladkin and Buhalis, 2016). However, it may not always be possible to determine whether applicants are the right employees for a tourism business by examining SMAs because information, posts, comments, and followings in SMAs may be unrealistic, outdated, or even fake. Finally, while businesses may fail to hire the right employee, the findings suggest that job applicants may also lose job opportunities because of posts and comments that recruiters find on their SMAs.

*Managerial implications*
The findings of this study also have crucial practical implications for HR managers and professionals regarding recruitment strategies. They demonstrate the need to examine the potential of SMA data and the ability to use such information for hiring decisions. Hence, recruiters in tourism businesses can benefit from these findings in identifying the right employee in terms of organization-person fit. Given that recruiters use SMAs as a reference in hiring, the results of this study can provide important recommendations to managers to guide decision-making and policies in HR practices.

Another managerial implication is that not all data and information in the recruitment process may be available from applicants' SMAs. For example, their personal information may be incomplete with restricted access, out of date, or even belong to another person with the same name. Examining candidates' SMAs as a reference can reduce the risks associated with the reliability and validity of their posts and comments, reduce recruitment costs, save time, and hire the right employee. Time constraints are a critical factor in recruitment. Rigid selection transactions, extensive job applications, different department employees, and busy shifts are some of the challenges in recruitment. The findings also indicate that HR professionals must manage recruitment efficiently within a high job application-narrow time-right decision triangle. The validity of information in applicants' SMAs can be ensured through recruiters' experience.

Previous studies recommend that tourism HR professionals consider the reality of dealing with the workforce structure and problems, which is the core business element of the tourism labor market (Brien, 2004; Cortina and Luchman, 2013; Gibson and Swift, 2011). The selection of employees in tourism should not be seen as an ordinary job. In tourism, there is a delicate balance between human resources and guests to reach higher satisfaction. Therefore guest-person fit is crucial as well as organization-person fit. HR managers, professionals, and recruiters should not impose their own emotional or ideological beliefs and ethnic values, attitudes, and behaviors while examining information about candidates drawn from SMAs.

*Limitations and future research directions*
Despite the significant findings, this study has several limitations that future studies can overcome. First, this study only examined how to evaluate job applicants' SMA during recruitment. It did not consider job application forms, the opinions of previous bosses or managers, or reference letters. Second, evaluations were based on candidates' current SMA posts, while deleted posts were not investigated. Third, data were only gathered from professionals and recruiters responsible for human resources in tourism businesses, whereas general managers and department managers of tourism businesses were excluded. Fourth, current employees were not interviewed to determine whether they knew that their SMAs were checked during recruitment.

Regarding further research, the findings and implications of this study can provide the variables for a questionnaire in a quantitative research. Even though the findings of this

study seem to be consistent with the predictions of SJT, further research should be conducted examining this pattern in different approaches to provide more valid and reliable data regarding how information obtained from candidates' SMAs affects recruitment. Future studies should include the general managers of hotels, tour operators, travel agencies, restaurants, etc., to reduce subjectivity and bias in recruitment.

## Conclusions

To conclude, the existing study expands HRM literature by discussing the influence of candidate employees' SMAs on HR professionals' hiring decisions as a job application reference in the tourism industry. According to the findings, HR managers in the tourism industry generally prefer to examine candidates' SMAs rather than traditional references because they can quickly and cheaply screen many applicants. In addition, negative content posts of individuals on SM negatively affect recruiters' decisions.

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(The Appendix follows overleaf)

**Appendix 1**

| Code | Sector | Gender | Age | Experience in HRM (Years) | Experience in the tourism industry (Years) | Role |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| HRM1 | Hotel | Female | 30 | 5 | 7 | HRM |
| HRM2 | Hotel | Female | 34 | 10 | 10 | HRM |
| HRM3 | Hotel | Female | 33 | 6 | 7 | HRM |
| HRM4 | Hotel | Female | 29 | 5 | 6 | HRM |
| HRM5 | Hotel | Male | 33 | 7 | 10 | HRM |
| HRM6 | Hotel | Male | 39 | 10 | 14 | HRM |
| HRM7 | Hotel | Female | 34 | 7 | 9 | HRM |
| HRM8 | Hotel | Male | 35 | 10 | 15 | HRM |
| HRM9 | Hotel | Female | 38 | 10 | 17 | HRM |
| HRM10 | Hotel | Female | 31 | 8 | 8 | HRM |
| HRM11 | Hotel | Female | 30 | 10 | 12 | HRM |
| HRM12 | Hotel | Female | 30 | 6 | 13 | HRM |
| HRM13 | Hotel | Male | 43 | 14 | 23 | HRM |
| HRM14 | Hotel | Male | 37 | 7 | 17 | HRM |
| HRM15 | Hotel | Female | 25 | 5 | 7 | HRM |
| HRM16 | Hotel | Female | 30 | 8 | 10 | HRM |
| HRM17 | Hotel | Male | 32 | 6 | 14 | HRM |
| HRM18 | Hotel | Male | 35 | 6 | 15 | HRM |
| HRM19 | TA | Male | 34 | 5 | 14 | HRM |
| HRM20 | TA | Male | 36 | 5 | 15 | HRM |
| HRM21 | TA | Male | 40 | 15 | 20 | HRM |
| HRM22 | TA | Female | 31 | 11 | 12 | HRM |
| HRM23 | TA | Female | 28 | 5 | 8 | HRM |
| HRM24 | TA | Male | 35 | 7 | 10 | HRM |
| HRM25 | TA | Male | 39 | 19 | 19 | HRM |
| HRM26 | TA | Female | 32 | 7 | 10 | HRM |
| HRM27 | TA | Male | 40 | 13 | 16 | HRM |
| HRM28 | TA | Male | 38 | 8 | 19 | HRM |
| HRM29 | R&B | Male | 31 | 7 | 7 | Owner& HRM |
| HRM30 | R&B | Male | 48 | 18 | 18 | Owner& HRM |
| HRM31 | R&B | Male | 42 | 8 | 14 | HRM |
| HRM32 | R&B | Male | 49 | 10 | 29 | Owner& HRM |
| HRM33 | R&B | Male | 41 | 10 | 21 | Owner& HRM |
| HRM34 | R&B | Male | 38 | 7 | 14 | Owner& HRM |
| HRM35 | R&B | Male | 42 | 8 | 22 | Owner& HRM |
| HRM36 | R&B | Male | 39 | 9 | 19 | Owner& HRM |
| HRM37 | GHSC | Female | 38 | 6 | 18 | HRM |
| HRM38 | GHSC | Female | 32 | 6 | 10 | HRM |

TA: Travel agencies, GHSC: Ground Handling Service Companies, R&B: Restaurants and Bars, HRM: Human Resources Manager

**Table A1.**
Respondents' characteristics

**Appendix 2**

1- Do HR professionals, recruiters, and tourism business managers examine candidates' SMAs in the recruitment process? If yes, what is the primary purpose of examining candidates' SMA during recruitment?
*1.1. Do you examine candidates' SMAs during recruitment?*
*1.2. Do you think it is legal to examine candidates' SMAs?*
*1.3. Do you think it is ethical to examine candidates' SMAs?*
*1.4. Do you think you can learn candidates' socio-psychological characteristics by examining SMAs?*
*1.5. What are the reasons for examining candidates' SMAs during recruitment?*
*1.6. For which roles do you mostly examine candidates' SMAs?*
2- What kind of information about the candidates is examined in SMA? What type of judgment can be made about the candidates by examining this information?
*2.1. What kinds of posts do you examine in candidates' SMAs?*
*2.2. What kinds of contacts (followings, followers, or both) do you examine in candidates, SMAs?*
*2.3. What kind of comments do you examine in candidates' SMAs?*
*2.4. Do you examine the contents of posts, contacts, and comments in candidates' SMAs?*
3- Is SMA information of candidates effective in the judgments of managers in the recruitment process? If yes, which issues are more effective and how?
*3.1. Can information from candidates' SMAs be reliable as a reference?*
*3.2. Can information from candidates' SMAs be valid as a reference?*
3.3. Do you want to add anything else about using candidates' SMA information as a reference tool?

**Table A2.**
Interview questions

**Corresponding author**
Mahmut Demir can be contacted at: mdemir1@gmail.com