
At Face(book) value: uses of Facebook in hiring processes and the role of identity in social networks

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Abstract: This study conducted 19 semi-structured in-depth interviews with employers from over six industries who use job candidate Facebook information in hiring processes. The results generated seven key findings, with three contextual themes (economy and timing, weight of Facebook, and employee curiosity) preceding four dominant thematic employer preferences (importance of online personal appearance/portrayal, lifestyle image, wall posts likes and interests and privacy settings). A number of important employer assumptions derivative of the themes are also discussed in relation to social network user on and offline identities. In terms of theoretical contributions, our findings expand conceptions of employee branding, contest the freedom affiliated with virtual identity, and create a new form of digital divide.

Keywords: social networking; Facebook; employment; employers; employees; job applicants; technology; information fluency; hiring processes; identity; online image; code-switching; generation-X; millennials.

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1 Introduction

Over the past six years, Facebook has become one of the most popular social networking sites (SNS), providing users with a convenient way to communicate and share information with friends and family. With over 500 million world wide active users, 50% of which login everyday, and with integration with a large number of prominent websites, Facebook is a highly influential player in today's online world (Facebook, Inc., 2010b). Although there is a balanced amount of men and women of all different ages that use Facebook, women use the SNS more at 54%, while the age group that uses it the most, 18 to 25, uses it at 20% (DigitalSurgeons, 2010). Although Facebook's mission is to "give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected" (Facebook, Inc., 2010a), it has expanded from a simple social media outlet to a valuable tool for employers.

There has been a significant amount of media coverage regarding several incidents where employees have been terminated based on their Facebook activity. For instance, a waitress in North Carolina was terminated after employers became aware of her Facebook post ranting about dealing with challenging customers (Frazier, 2010). Also, a woman from Connecticut was terminated after making negative comments about her employer on her Facebook account (The Associated Press). These incidents appear to be rising as more people look to Facebook as an outlet to blow off steam.

While employers are using Facebook to monitor their employees, they have also begun to use it as a screening tool when considering potential candidates. Because this is a fairly new trend, a standardised set of guidelines has yet to be established, with employers often assessing job applicants in a subjective manner. Although much attention is paid to how people are terminated due to incidents involving Facebook, less is known about why and how employers use Facebook to screen potential candidates during the hiring process. This study investigates how a variety of employers from over six industries (see Appendix A) interpret candidate Facebook profile information and how it affects hiring processes. It focuses on generation-X employers aged 31 to 45,

because they are often making hiring decisions as members of generation-Y or millennials, who make up the largest group of SNS users (Bumgarner, 2007), graduate and enter into the workforce. Indeed, according to Anderson and Rainie (2010), millennials are far more comfortable than any previous generation at publicly disclosing information about themselves, which has led to ethical concerns about employers seeking out millennial job seekers' information on Facebook.

2 Social uses of Facebook

2.1 Uses of Facebook

Several studies show that the primary use of Facebook is for social purposes. For example, students use Facebook to further connect with people they have met offline or to meet more people in their physical communities (Lampe et al., 2006). Ellison et al. (2007) also found that Facebook users spend a significant amount of time using Facebook to maintain offline friendships. Their study also showed that Facebook helps create social capital, which is defined as the resources individuals acquire through the relationships they have with others. Bumgarner (2007) confirmed that Facebook was primarily used as a social activity, but added it is also used as a directory. Here, concepts of voyeurism and exhibition were also discussed as motivations for using Facebook, where users explore other users' pages and information.

Many researchers have attempted to categorise uses of Facebook by developing themes or concepts. According to Sledgianowski and Kulviwat (2009), perceptions of playfulness, critical mass, trust, usefulness and ease of usage all positively affect both intent to use and actual usage of SNSs while normative pressure has a negative effect. Of these factors, perceived playfulness had the strongest positive effect, followed by critical mass. Another study identified three dimensions to categorise uses of SNSs: information dimension, friendship dimension, and connection dimension (Bonds-Raacke and Raccke, 2010). The study also found a gender difference with usage. Men tended to use these sites for dating purposes more than women do.

Moreover, Urista et al.'s (2008) study identified five themes, which explain why students use SNSs to satisfy their needs and wants: efficient communication, convenient communication, curiosity about others, popularity and relationship formation and reinforcement, with efficient communication being the most popular. Joinson (2008) also used two studies to discover seven uses and gratifications for using Facebook. The seven uses and gratifications were social connection, shared identities, content, social investigation, social network surfing and status updating. Maintaining friendships with people in other areas was mentioned the most when asked about why respondents use Facebook.

There were also other observations about less prominent, but still notable, uses of Facebook. Pennington (2008) asked whether computer-mediated communication played different roles in the development of new relationships. In-depth interviews showed that Facebook is a helpful tool for shy users when they are in new relationships, especially romantic. Another study suggested different personalities have unique uses for SNSs (Amichai-Hamburger and Vinitzky, 2010). Users who are extroverted tend to have more friends and contribute personal information to their profiles less than introverted users. Also, those who are more neurotic are more likely to post their photos on their profiles

than those who are less neurotic. Such factors raise questions about the perception of Facebook users and how they vary from person to person.

2.2 Perceptions of identity through Facebook

In previous years, first impressions were vital; regardless of whether individuals were meeting for personal or professional reasons. However, with the advancement of communication technologies, SNSs are often serving as the initial impression or the platform through which individuals are being portrayed (Gosling et al., 2007). Many users claim that Facebook is a convenient tool for shedding light upon the personality and character traits of others. Information, which is readily accessible, allows members to truthfully communicate and discover compatibilities with both offline and new online acquaintances (Bryant, 2008).

However, this has not been the case historically. Past studies have defined virtual identity as one's representation or appearance that holds true to a different plane of reality. Friedberg (2006) defines virtual identity as an alternate representation of a person's functional image; one that is transferred from reality to a virtual plane of meaning. Oftentimes the distinctions blur between an individual's true identity and the fantasy of who he or she wants to be (Turkle, 2011). Indeed, SNS such as Facebook, allow users to reinvent themselves and claim as many electronic personae as one wants (Donath, 1999).

Additional, studies have focused on whether the self-presented online identity is an accurate representation of the user's offline identity. It is widely known and accepted that Facebook users have control over the information they present to their audience and whom they allow to view particular information. Contrary to the offline reality, this form of privacy control allows Facebook users to methodically present various self-images to their online audience. In a recent study, Zhao et al. (2008) found that self-projection aimed at generating a desired impression of sociability and likeliness on the user's audience. Essentially, Facebook has allowed users to create and adopt a socially desirable identity that they will otherwise not be capable of producing in the offline world. This finding directly correlates with the idea that when individuals are presenting themselves to an audience, they strive to maintain complete control over their perceived appearance and persona, thus purposely minimising any exhibition of a flawed or disagreeable personality (Hewitt and Forte, 2006). However, Bargh et al. (2002) found that during both offline and online interaction, individuals were quicker to respond to their actual self-descriptive traits rather than to their idealised ones.

In direct comparison to the numerous idealised self-description theories, it can also be argued that the information portrayed on Facebook is congruent to an individual's actual identity. This theory is closely associated with the five factor model, which also describes personality dimensions. These findings indicated that certain personality dimensions are indeed associated with Facebook use. For example, an individual who scored high on the trait of extraversion was more likely to belong to numerous Facebook groups (Ross et al., 2009). Furthermore, the similarity in behaviour occurring within both the offline and online world revealed that the online social world might not be all that different from the real-life social world (Weisbuch et al., 2009). Continuing with this view, Back et al. (2010) argued that the creation of an idealised identity was implausible. The study found that certain aspects of Facebook, such as wall posts and feedback from friends, provided

vital information about an individual's reputation that were too difficult to control. This information would condemn an idealised identity to fail.

Despite users best efforts, Facebook remains a two-way, interactive online community that not only allows an individual to control the information he/she displays but also that which they receive. Waggoner et al. (2009) compared active perceivers who chose the type of information they received to passive perceivers who received identical information without choice. The study found that individuals were more confident in their impressions when they received predetermined information, rather than when they were granted free choice. This reinforced the argument that individuals no longer have complete control over self-presentation on the web (Buffardi and Campbell, 2008). Ultimately, this realisation raised important questions regarding impression management and self-presentation in an unmistakably anonymous online environment (Wang et al., 2010).

2.3 Privacy Among Facebook Users

Although the literature on Facebook, privacy and job applicant screening has increased considerably in the last eight years, still much of what is known today is based on anecdotal data and summary reviews of the current state of the field. A careful review of the existing published literature yields few empirically based results regarding generational differences among attitudes about Facebook and its role in the hiring process. Current literature consists of articles that use anecdotal information to argue the existence of privacy violations by employers or to provide summary reviews of what is known on this issue.

Along these lines, college students' self-reported strategies to protect their information include: exclusion of personal information from their profiles, the use of private e-mail messages to communicate, alteration of the default privacy settings and the use of nicknames (Young and Quan-Haase, 2009; Tufekci, 2008). However, some college student users of Facebook are still unaware that other people besides intended 'friends' are viewing their profiles and that their information is not safe from these unauthorised viewers (Brandenburg, 2008). Nosko et al. (2010) found that 25% of all possible information that could potentially be shared by users was disclosed in their survey respondents' profile pages. In the same study, they uncovered that age was a determinant of how much information was revealed because as age increased, the amount of personal information in profiles decreased (Nosko et al., 2010).

2.4 Employers and Facebook

As with the introduction of any new technological phenomenon, a variety of age groups often respond quite differently to changing attitudes about its usage (Lehmann, 2009). In the case of Facebook, such differences are especially true with its usage in workplace settings (Smith and Kidder, 2010). Millennials constitute the largest group of Facebook users and were the sole consumers from its inception in 2004 until Facebook went public (Ellison et al., 2007). Millennials are far more comfortable than any previous generation at publicly disclosing information about themselves, which has led to ethical concerns about employers seeking out Millennial job seekers' information on Facebook (Anderson and Rainie, 2010). There is growing anecdotal information in how companies use SNSs, such as Facebook in applicant searching and screening process (Smith and Kidder, 2010).

According to a 2009 CareerBuilder.com survey, 45% of employers surveyed claimed to have used SNSs to pre-screen candidates with 25% of those employers specifically using Facebook. Sometimes these explorations uncover positive information about potential candidates that otherwise would not be present on a resume or cover letter, however more interesting cases emerge when potentially unwanted information is discovered (Roberts and Roach, 2009). As previously mentioned, millennials feel the need to 'show' rather than 'tell' and express their views in a variety of ways on Facebook, which potential employers can find worryingly questionable. As many as 63% of employers viewing SNS profiles have rejected candidates based upon information found within those profiles (Davis, 2007).

Job candidates are unaware if employers are indeed seeking more information about them via Facebook, which can present an ethical issue. This ethical issue uses support from the US Fair Credit Reporting Act that states job candidates must be made aware of employers using their credit report as a pre-screening tool and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which states that discrimination against age, sex, race, religion and disability in the job placing process is against the law (Zeidner, 2007). Alternatively, some employers argue that since Facebook is an *online* SNS, consequently information placed on the web then becomes public property and can be used to pre-screen applicants (Clark, 2010).

But how does a generational divide among employers and job applicants affect usage of Facebook in hiring methods? Most of the employers are now coming from generation-X, who in turn are more private and less self-oriented than millennials (Smith and Kidder, 2010; Lyons et al., 2007). Smith and Kidder (2010) note generation-X MBA students have a general attitude regarding Facebook use, that if job applicants appear unwise enough to post inappropriate content online, it is acceptable to take advantage of this mistake. Limitations in these studies reveal the lack of empirical data on generation-X employers' attitudes and reasoning in using Facebook as a tool for pre-screening. More data needs to be collected to uncover the relationship between Facebook profiles and job placement success with generation-X employers. As more and more millennials enter the workforce, it will become necessary to understand how their self-discourse with Facebook has affected their chance of successful job placement with the previous generation. In order to address the gaps in understanding how potential employee Facebook content is used in employers' hiring processes, this study created the following research question:

RQ How is a job applicant's Facebook content used by generation-X employers during hiring decisions?

3 Method

With a lack of academic studies focusing on our topic, a qualitative approach has many benefits to offer due to its discovery-oriented nature and its strength in discerning unknown variables and relationships (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Given the sensitive nature of our topic resulting from privacy guidelines affiliated with equal opportunity policies, a qualitative approach may also be more responsive to ethical concerns (Janesick, 1998), as well as be effective in uncovering honest and accurate data (Pennington, 2008). For these reasons, this study uses in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews are defined as a qualitative tool of inquiry incorporating open-ended questions

to gain insight into peoples' experiences, perceptions, opinions, feelings and knowledge (Patton, 2002; Pennington, 2008). They are also useful for exploring and gathering information about a subject's thoughts, behaviours and worldview (Boyce and Neale, 2006; Kahn and Cannell, 1957). The specific relationship developed between interviewee and interviewer also helps cultivate in-depth data (Silverman, 2001).

Therefore, in order to address the research question, this study used a purposive sample to conduct 19 in-depth semi-structured interviews with employers belonging to generation-X who use Facebook when making hiring decisions. Of 80 different businesses approached for potential interviews, only 19 consented. Employers' age ranges did not often fit our criteria and many business supervisors stated they did not use Facebook during hiring processes. However, equal opportunity clauses or company policies may have directed their responses even if they did use Facebook. As a result of the immense difficulties in acquiring interviews, personal contacts were often used, which seemed to allow the respondents more room to be candid about interviewing processes.

Each 25–40 minute interview was conducted between October 2010 and September 2011 in Miami, Florida. The recorded interviews were conducted primarily at offices, homes, or public locations and when necessary over the phone. The selection of our subjects contracted after all of the larger corporations declined interviews because of 'equal opportunity employment laws'. The researchers were forced to interview any small business employer who was willing to give an interview, had used Facebook in hiring processes, and was within the generation-X age range. This actually worked to our advantage as it surprisingly created a diverse pool of subjects in terms of gender and occupation, which we feel gives this study more breadth and hopefully makes our results more applicable to the hiring process in general.

Respondents worked in food and beverage, education, wellness, information technology, healthcare, travel, advertising, and law enforcement industries and included eight women and eleven men consisting mainly of Caucasian Hispanics, with a total of 14, followed by five Caucasian, non-Hispanics (see Appendix A for respondent profiles).

During the interviews, questions were divided into four genres: respondent demographic and professional information, perceptions of Facebook, Facebook profile screening techniques, and traits valued by respondents for hiring purposes (see Appendix B for interview questions). Once the interviews were completed (see Appendix C for a short transcribed interview), the data were then categorised, classified and labelled according to McCracken's (1988) rigorous five-stage interpretive process and Miles and Huberman's (1994) analytical method, where observations are found, compared, grouped, interpreted and analysed.

Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest researchers affix codes to interview transcripts, identify relationships between variables, patterns, themes, commonalities and differences, and to discover generalisations and present them as constructs or theories. Within this process, the inductive nature of qualitative research (Janesick, 1998) allows the themes to develop organically. Once repetition from multiple sources is obtained, qualitative data is confirmed (Morse, 1998).

To adhere to this process, the researchers first held short discussions after each interview to highlight interesting thoughts and statements they heard during the interviews. They then listened to the recorded interviews again or read through the transcribed versions, and began to pull out individual thoughts and observations. As the

connections between the various observations began to take shape, they were formed into groups, where recurring themes began to be uncovered.

The following studies laid the theoretical foundations that informed the process by which our themes were selected. Gosling et al.'s (2007) study noted the importance between the SNS platform and its influence on external viewer impressions. Bryant (2008) examined the means by which users communicate their personality and character traits, as well as compatibilities, while Zhao et al. (2008) looked at the role of power-relations behind self-projection aimed at generating a desired impression of sociability and likeliness on the user's audience. Finally, Bargh et al. (2002) noted the importance of both offline and online interactions and how interactive traits can be either self-descriptive or idealised.

After our initial themes were developed, they were then subjected to further analysis and peer-review before finalising the findings. This complex process aided the development of the resulting themes (Spiggle, 1994), which were complemented by member checks from three of the interviewees (Lindlof, 1995) to interpret the validity of the interpretations (Belk et al., 1988). In our case, the member checks resulted in no significant changes in the data analysis.

4 Findings and analysis

The results generate seven key findings, with three contextual themes preceding four dominant thematic trends. First, a careful review of each interview pointed to the importance of context in understanding the underlying motivations employers use to seek candidate information via Facebook. Each of these three factors: economy and timing, weight of Facebook, and employer curiosity are identified and discussed. In addition, four common themes pertinent to all respondents also emerged after the analysis of the interviews. The data revealed that respondents place heightened importance on the following job applicant Facebook characteristics to create their perceptions of the candidate: online personal appearance/portrayal, lifestyle image, wall posts likes and interests, and privacy settings.

4.1 Contextual themes

4.1.1 Economy and timing

Most respondents claimed they use Facebook as a tool for saving time and money. Many cited the large number of applicants during the current economic downturn for their increased use. By turning to Facebook before a potential candidate is selected for an interview, employers are able to 'weed' out applicants who do not meet the company profile, which in turn saves them time and money.

"We had a position that was suddenly open for a teacher and for some reason the county posted it on the internet and suddenly we had like two-or-three-hundred applications for one position, so it's a tool to give you information to see what they're about, to see if they fit that role for the teacher". – Respondent 4

“Now with the economy, the last position we had open had so many candidates that I found myself going in to see if they had a Facebook page right away to try to screen and weed out candidates and come down to a small group to interview”. – Respondent 11

“I’d rather spend three minutes of my time on Facebook than waste twenty minutes of my time when that person comes in for an interview”. – Respondent 12

Since time and money are often cited as valuable resources in the business world, respondents from small and large businesses alike felt that Facebook was a beneficial tool and that its use would increase with time. However, not all employers interviewed practiced this method as a few stated that they waited until after an interview was conducted to use Facebook in order to give candidates a fair chance at proving himself or herself in person.

4.1.2 Weight of Facebook

Even though Facebook is used to screen out large numbers of applicants, the employers initially noted that the weight of Facebook is on the latter end of the hiring-decision spectrum with the interview coming first followed by the resume. Once candidates have been chosen to come in for an interview, then the weight of a candidate’s Facebook page supposedly decreases according to employers. Only a few of our respondents claim that Facebook does not have a final say in their hiring decision. Other respondents compared a potential candidate’s Facebook profile to a reference letter because they felt it gave similar insight into the overall candidate’s character.

“Facebook has been very useful. It’s an additional other good reference source because I think it shows judgment because at the point that you have something on Facebook, it’s out there for everyone to see so you have to have good judgment in what you put out there”. – Respondent 3

“I think I would look at it like if it was another reference letter, like an addition to your resume. Facebook tells you a little bit more about what the person’s about”. – Respondent 4

However when asked what was more important than Facebook in the hiring process, Respondent 19 indicated,

“Well, the in-person interview...if they make it to that point”.

Here the allusion is that if applicants get past the initial Facebook assessment, then the in-person interview is more important, even though the use of Facebook may screen applicants out before getting to this second and supposedly more important stage.

4.1.3 Employer curiosity

Many respondents also stated that simply having a visual image of the candidate made them feel more comfortable during the interview process, especially when conducting long-distance phone interviews.

“Typically if we do a phone interview with a candidate that either can’t come into our office or is out of state, we would then do references but we may want a visual on the person as well so we use Facebook for that and LinkedIn as well. Usually we go to LinkedIn first, since it’s more of professional site but

then we look at Facebook as well just to get a visual on somebody”.
– Respondent 1

Some respondents, mainly those born in the later part of generation-X, agreed that they understood and took into account that Facebook is a SNS used on a more personal basis. They added that they first turn to the professional SNS, LinkedIn, before looking at Facebook.

These three contextual dimensions: economy and timing, weight of Facebook, and employee curiosity also lead to four job applicant Facebook characteristic preferential themes by employers: importance of personal appearance/portrayal, lifestyle image, wall post likes and dislikes, and privacy settings.

4.2 Thematic trends

All of the respondents said they looked at applicant Facebook photos to learn more about their potential job candidates. In addition to presenting physical appearance, the photos provide a glimpse into users’ recent activities, as well as create an overall image of potential employees. The amount of time spent looking at pictures varied. Some respondents said they only look at a candidate’s profile picture while others said they go deeper and look at pictures within a candidate’s albums or pictures where candidates have been tagged by others. In particular, they focused on the importance of online appearance, online representation of lifestyle, as well as the online wall posts and likes.

4.2.1 Importance of online appearance/portrayal

Respondents stated that they look at pictures to determine whether or not the candidates look professional and well groomed.

“Facebook at least can give you, most people have a picture, you get at least a reasonable concept of their appearance, like is this person sharp, is this person polished”. – Respondent 10

“You can form an opinion off a picture but I don’t form opinions just off of one picture. It would just make me feel more at ease you know if somebody that I had you know potentially for an interview and they had a professional profile rather than some weird picture, you know”. – Respondent 1

One respondent stated that for certain positions it is important to have ‘professional’ looking employees because it reflects upon their business.

“As long as you don’t have all these things through here and through here...we understand that it’s very cool nowadays to have a thing through your tongue but as a receptionist it’s not that cool”. – Respondent 12

It became quite clear that employers made hiring judgments based on the visual image applicants create on their Facebook accounts. Respondent 12 clearly notes piercings are not appropriate for his/her interpretation of the workforce environment.

4.2.2 Lifestyle image

In addition, some respondents claimed that they were not only concerned with a candidate’s physical appearance but also what lifestyle the candidate’s photographs promoted. While most respondents looked at several pictures, the profile picture

remained the most important since it is the most prominent picture on a candidate's page. Overall, the respondents look to see what candidates' photos say about their personality and disposition.

"You can see if they're sociable and if they have strong bonds with family and friends, for instance, or if they're involved in some community work, I think it gives you keys to character". – Respondent 11

"I think that Facebook gives you much more insight into their character which today to me is more important than anything else". – Respondent 19

"The more doubt I have, the deeper I look. If they have a red flag, then I search". – Respondent 16

"You can tell a lot about a person's character and personality, which is really important in the hiring process". – Respondent 19

The respondents stated that if, hypothetically, they found something on a candidate's photos that was completely appalling, they would probably discard his or her application without further inquiry.

"Something on Facebook could definitely deter me from considering them". – Respondent 19

However, most respondents said that this has yet to happen. The most prominent issue that almost all of the respondents continuously mentioned was partying via consuming alcohol. The respondents felt that if candidates' pictures constantly depicted them intoxicated at bars and clubs, then they can only assume that this behaviour may negatively affect them in the workplace. The respondents went further to say that candidates are creating a persona by the types of pictures they post and that it is hard to expect that others will not pass judgment, whether it is good or bad.

"If you put a picture in there and you're in bikini then what is the perception, you want people to think that you're a party animal, right, otherwise you would put a picture in a (business) suit or if you put a picture of you at the Eifel tower you want people to know that you're a traveller...". – Respondent 8

"If you look at someone's pictures and say they have a bunch of pictures up of themselves and they're young kids out of college and they're all just getting drunk or wasted with their friends and you see the majority of those rather than travelling or doing more positive things in their life you're gonna have a judgment". – Respondent 9

One respondent mentioned that she looks at candidates' photos to determine if they are well suited for certain work environments. She explained that a workplace can be very strict while others can be laid back and that sometimes, by looking at candidates' photos, she can avoid moving further into the interview process if she can already see that the online images are not right for the position.

"The picture can speak a thousand words cause the picture can say, it can tell us how this person represents themselves...if we're looking to bring a person who's gonna be in an environment that is very corporate...and this is a 20 year old person whose profile picture is in a tanga [thong] and drunk with alcohol...was it an isolated behaviour, that picture, or is this person really like that...they might not fit the culture of that environment". – Respondent 8

Only one of the respondents felt seeing pictures of applicants socialising with alcohol was not abnormal. Finally, as a whole, most respondents largely agreed that they felt a potential candidate's Facebook profile fairly represented that candidate's character and his/her work ethics. This echoed Weisbuch et al. (2009) and Bargh et al.'s (2002) studies. Respondents felt comfortable summing up a candidate based on his/her Facebook profile, as well as by using that information as a tool to guide their decision making in choosing a candidate that would have a positive impact on their company.

"I think it's a great tool to screen potential candidates because it allows you to see any potential liabilities of hiring them because you get some insight on what their ethics and values are and how their day to day life may impact either negatively or positively towards whatever position they're applying for".
– Respondent 6

"It's a snap shot of who you are as a whole". – Respondent 12

4.2.3 *Wall posts, likes, and interests*

The way candidates portrayed themselves through their wall posts, as well as what people wrote on their walls were also crucial in influencing decision-making processes for employers. In addition, the language and tones that were used in these wall posts were also taken into careful consideration. The respondents used this as a judgment of character on the candidate's part, and to determine whether they were appropriate or inappropriate. In essence, the language and comments are feared for they might be translated into the employees' working environment through their writing and conversations.

"You get some insight on what their ethics and values are and how their day to day life may impact either negatively or positively towards whatever position they are applying for. It also identifies any strengths or weaknesses they have". – Respondent 6

"I look at their comments, I look at what type of words they are using, are they using four letter words in their comments"? – Respondent 17

"In general as an employer, they are utilizing it to screen people, they are not on there only to just look at pictures, it's to see whether or not this person is a liability if I bring him/her in the door". – Respondent 10

"I also look at things that they post and what their friends post. I hate these people who put FML as their status. That shows to me that you don't really value what your life is; it is a very strong phrase...now I am one to use foul language loosely, but I do it within my comfort zone. I think there is a time and a place for everything, and you just have to respect yourself". – Respondent 2

As stated in the quote above, some respondents understand that language and content can be different in every scenario, but as an outsider looking in on a profile, they have to make decisions based on the information they see. If employers perceive what they see as a lack of respect and self-preservation in candidates' online writing or in the writing of their online acquaintances, a red flag comes up for those who make hiring decisions. Respondents see certain SNS behaviour and talk negatively translating to professional behaviour. Besides the language and tone, employers also use candidate interests within

Facebook's 'likes and interests' page to categorise and create generalisations, which also influence employer hiring decisions.

"Its ultimately important to not talk about politics, religion, and some of those other things with folks that you don't know very well especially in a business setting, you never know how they are going to react. Those are already kind of touch sensitive topics and you're creating friction, and there is not context where the employer can understand why the candidate would want to post something like that". – Respondent 10

"Their affiliations, their interests. You can tell a lot about a person by all of that. You may not be 100 percent accurate, but there certainly is a perception that that person is creating for whomever looks at their profile". – Respondent 8

Finally, as a whole, most respondents largely agreed that they felt a potential candidate's Facebook profile fairly represented that candidate's character and his/her work ethics, with a small minority citing that they were more lenient when analysing profiles.

4.2.4 Privacy setting

The majority of respondents agreed that placing personal information on a public medium is not intelligent, even if users were not aware of the privacy settings.

"The internet has a lot of public information out there, you really need to think twice before what you put up on the internet represents you. Someone in a younger generation, than me, that could be a downfall for them. That they're not mature enough to think ahead or of the future. They don't have a right to just look at your page. Most people have privacy settings, but again you should have privacy settings for your information". – Respondent 9

Respondent 9 summarised what a majority of the respondents tried to relay. In this sense, the respondents acknowledged that Facebook, being a social environment, is not a top priority and that other resources are consulted first; however, if a candidate is willing to publically expose him or herself then the employer is willing to use that to their advantage.

"I'm from a generation that I'm not as exposed to it [instant celebrity and notoriety on Facebook, but I know it's big. Unfortunately, it's something that is part of our culture. You shouldn't be airing your dirty laundry and talking about your problems. The people are talking about intimacies. To me, you're too naked out there for the world to see". – Respondent 11

"If you don't know me, it will create a perception. We are the employers now, and I mean I'm not that old, but I didn't have internet in high school. You know my son now and my nephews are growing in a different era. But I still think its important that they make a separation between what they need to share with the world and what are the things they should keep to themselves. Its just little things like that that will impact both your professional and personal life". – Respondent 8

Placing private information online perplexes employers who use Facebook in hiring decisions. They believe allowing public access either intentionally or unintentionally, to personal information in SNSs ultimately creates advantages or disadvantages for the candidate.

5 Discussion

Our research confirms a wide variety of employers use Facebook profile information as an integral component in hiring processes. While the nature of our method does not necessarily yield numbers to generalise, perhaps CareerBuilder's quote of 45% of employers who use Facebook for hiring (CareerBuilder.com, 2009) may have underestimated the use of SNSs in hiring practices. This also means that the 63% of employers who reject applicants based upon information from SNS profiles (Davis, 2007) may be higher as well.

Indeed, certain contradictions were found among the majority of the respondents' answers. Although many claimed that a resume and experience take priority over information found on a job candidate's profile, they also claimed that the very same information could prevent them from obtaining an interview. This contradiction seemed to unravel as respondents continued to explain or rationalise their thoughts, which could be a sign of image control on the respondent's part. For example, as respondents discussed the weight of appearance on Facebook, it seemed as though many began to modify their answers in order to sound less superficial. After initially mentioning how certain information could deter them from scheduling an interview, they then proceeded to explain how Facebook was more of a supplemental instrument than a final determining factor in their hiring decisions.

In this vein, four employer assumptions grew out of the analysis of the interviews and themes:

- 1 employers assume that applicants cannot code-switch between documented online social behaviours/activities and work environments
- 2 employers assume social behaviours exhibited in SNS content spill into professional work settings
- 3 employers assume that applicants place heightened efforts into their online SNS identity to carefully craft an image that correctly resembles their true personalities
- 4 employers assume that employee behaviour and identity should extend beyond work hours and places and into employee online SNS content.

Assumption number four is similar to the concept of employee branding. Employee branding is a process whereby employees infuse organisational associations of products or brand attributes into their work behaviour (Ind, 2001). Active consideration/incorporation of the brand's interests into employee identity is paramount to success. For employees, this means the brand's messages are to be incorporated into their everyday experiences instinctively (Mitchell, 2002), in what Harquail (2012) sees as a new twist on identity regulation through psychologically connecting the brand to the employee.

Given the themes and four employer assumptions resulting from the analysis of our interviews, our study's contribution to broader theoretical foundations occurs in three areas: the expansion of the employee branding concept, the contestation of the freedom affiliated with virtual identity, and the creation of a new digital divide.

First, our results expand Ind's (2001), Mitchell's (2002) and Harquail's (2012) conceptual definition of employee branding to include organisational preference to control prospective worker identity and behaviour into on and offline worlds. The original organisational definition limits employee branding to relationships with products mostly during work hours. With SNSs, employee branding now enables potential employee identity regulation beyond aligning product branding with employees and more with company values, politics, appearances, behaviour and religious preferences. Those who seek employment would need to conform to employer identity and behaviour preferences in the virtual world, and in their online representation of what they do in the offline world.

Second, our results contest Donath's (1999), Turkle's (2011) and Friedberg's (2006) theoretical conceptions of virtual identity by challenging conceptions of the internet as a place of freedom and escape for users. In essence, with employees now examining SNS content of potential employees, the freedom to publically create online identities is curtailed. For those who seek employment, either documented online life outside of work will conform or will need to conform to employer preferences. If their documented online lives do not conform to employer preferences, then potential employees will need to create an online identity partial to potential employers. In the latter scenario, identity would still fall under a virtual definition, yet it is driven by exogenous instead of endogenous influences. Where the initial rise of the internet enabled people to have multiple identities, our results suggest the diversity of online identities is likely to shrink. It is likely to adapt and become an extension of an employers hiring tool with individual virtual identity being compromised and at risk of becoming altered to present what an employer desires rather than an individual's preferred identity.

The irony with this potential outcome of employer preference is that among users, Facebook is primarily conceived of and used for social purposes (Bumgarner, 2007; Lampe et al., 2006; Ellison et al., 2007; Zhao et al., 2008). Of all of the various uses and gratifications Facebook users enjoy (Pennington, 2008; Joinson, 2008; Urista et al., 2008), none are intended for employment purposes. If employers are going to co-opt the original intention of Facebook and apply it to what they see as their benefit, then reverberations will likely be felt among SNS users with an eventual shift toward more 'professional' content likely to occur. The content, uses and gratifications of SNSs like Facebook may end up changing over time to reflect the so-called 'professional' values and preferences of employers.

Third, our results also create a new digital divide in terms of online identity. Those who are not dependent on seeking wage labour to sustain their lives in addition to those who own and/or manage businesses/organisations can enjoy more freedom in terms of creating their own virtual identities. Those who are in control get to define the identity or 'brand' for the potential employees. For SNS users seeking employment, they may not be able to afford the luxury of creating their preferred or true online identity. Their freedom is curtailed creating a divide in online identity, where those who are financially secure may be themselves, with those who are not, cannot. The power-relations of the economic necessity to secure work, and thus the economic livelihoods for the vast majority of employment seeking individuals may eventually seek to brand their online identities, and perhaps real-life identities to conform to potential employers. The direction of the influence within the relationship is largely unidirectional based on the employer defining the employment value of the virtual identity and behaviour.

6 Limitations and conclusions

Although these findings shed light on a growing trend, the study was limited to employers within the generation-X group. For comparative purposes, an equal number of respondents in various industries would be vital to fully access the diversity of practices. Perhaps researchers would find it fruitful to develop a survey that would reach beyond generation-X employers as a whole. Since surveys have the luxury of being anonymous, participants may respond even more honestly. Lastly, although clear patterns and common themes emerged after roughly half of the completed interviews in this study, it was limited to a total of 19 interviews. Future studies may want to increase the number of employers interviewed if possible.

In conclusion, Facebook continues to be a public platform for scrutiny. Job seekers should be aware that their future employers are closely observing their Facebook profiles in search of a window into their personality. Though this practice raises many ethical issues, it is an emerging phenomenon that has no intention of slowing. Our paper questions if employers are overstepping their boundaries by using personal information for professional hiring decisions and whether or not this is appropriate. The ethical question of whether employers are providing job candidates with equal opportunities or if image over qualification takes precedence has to be raised. Given the implications of the results of this study, perhaps a universal set of hiring guidelines that addresses the role of SNS content in hiring procedures needs to be publically debated.

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Appendix A

List of respondents (age, gender, ethnicity, industry)

-
- Respondent 1:* 38/male/Caucasian non-Hispanic/information technology
- Respondent 2:* 35/female/Caucasian Hispanic/healthcare
- Respondent 3:* 45/male/Caucasian Hispanic/information technology
- Respondent 4:* 45/male/Caucasian Hispanic/education
- Respondent 5:* 31/male/Caucasian Hispanic/information technology
- Respondent 6:* 31/male/Caucasian Hispanic/law enforcement
- Respondent 7:* 39/female/Caucasian non-Hispanic/food and beverage
- Respondent 8:* 39/female/Caucasian Hispanic/information technology
- Respondent 9:* 40/female/Caucasian non-Hispanic/wellness
- Respondent 10:* 37/male/Caucasian Hispanic/information technology
- Respondent 11:* 45/male/Caucasian Hispanic/food and beverage
- Respondent 12:* 38/male/Caucasian Hispanic/healthcare
- Respondent 13:* 41/female/Caucasian non-Hispanic/healthcare
- Respondent 14:* 42/male/Caucasian Hispanic/food and beverage
- Respondent 15:* 37/female/Caucasian Hispanic/travel
- Respondent 16:* 33/female/Caucasian Hispanic/travel
- Respondent 17:* 45/male/Caucasian non-Hispanic/advertising
- Respondent 18:* 31/male/Caucasian Hispanic/information technology
- Respondent 19:* 34/female/Caucasian Hispanic/Advertising
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Appendix B

In-depth interview questions

- 1 Please provide a brief professional background.
 - a What industry do you work in?
 - b What is your position?
 - c How long have you been working here?
- 2 What are your thoughts on Facebook?
- 3 How do you feel about using Facebook to screen potential candidates?
- 4 Do you use Facebook to screen your candidates?

- a If so, during what part of your job screenings do you begin to look at Facebook profiles?
- b Do you have general guidelines that you follow when examining a Facebook profile?
 - 1 If so, who created these guidelines?
- c How important is a candidate's Facebook profile when making hiring decisions?
 - 1 What factors are more important than a candidate's Facebook profile?
 - 2 What factors are less important than a candidate's Facebook profile?
- 5 When evaluating a candidate's Facebook profile, what factors do you look at?
 - a What factors are most important?
 - 1 Why?
 - 2 What do you infer from those factors?
- 6 What would cause you to disapprove of a candidate due to their Facebook profile?
 - a What about content?
 - b What about displaying information publicly?
 - c Have you ever disapproved of a candidate based on their Facebook profile?
- 7 Do you believe that a candidate's Facebook profile truly represents the candidate?
- 8 Do you have a personal Facebook profile?
 - a Would you be comfortable if a future employer examined your Facebook profile during the interview process?

Appendix C

Transcript #1

Interviewer: What industry do you work in?

Respondent 9: I work in the wellness industry concentrating on yoga.

Interviewer: What is your position?

Respondent 9: I am director of sales and strategic partnership.

Interviewer: How long have you been working here?

Respondent 9: I have worked for Green Monkey for approximately a year and a half.

Interviewer: What are your thoughts on Facebook?

Respondent 9: I love Facebook, um for me personally its helped me reconnect with old friends from college and that's a big way we communicate with one another and I love that you can see what people are doing in their lives and I just think it's a really smart way for you know people to communicate in this day and age.

Interviewer: Do you use Facebook to screen your candidates?

Respondent 9: Absolutely, when anybody applies for a position here we look at their... a lot of times people will say go ahead and look at my Facebook page cause that will give you insight to who they are, their social activities whether good or bad and just the type of person they are.

Interviewer: If so, during what part of your job screenings do you begin to look at Facebook profiles?

Respondent 9: I would say definitely look at their resume absolutely first and I would reach out to their references, their personal references or their past work experience, references and then I'll definitely look at their Facebook cause that gives a lot of history.

Interviewer: Do you have general guidelines that you follow when examining a Facebook profile?

Respondent 9: No, I just go on and you know look at everything from their wall post to see what type of person they are, I'll look at their information and look at their photos.

Interviewer: How important is a candidate's Facebook profile when making hiring decisions?

Respondent 9: I just think it's a fraction of it, its just a small part of...I mean the most important is their resume and their past professional and educational experience.

Interviewer: What factors are less important than a candidate's Facebook profile?

Respondent 9: For me personally, Facebook is definitely on the lower end of importance but it's definitely something I look at, I mean you know resume and personal references are much more important than Facebook.

Interviewer: When evaluating a candidate's Facebook profile, what factors do you look at?

Respondent 9: Their information, most importantly I go to their information. I kind of like to see where they went to college or what their past professional experience, work place has been. I like to see, maybe what types of groups or fan pages they're apart of.

Interviewer: What do you infer from those factors?

Respondent 9: Just to familiarize yourself with people, to get a little better. You know you can really tell about a person from their Facebook page, see what kind of people they hang out with, what kind of music, what kind of fan pages.

Interviewer: So all those factors are important to you when hiring them.

Respondent 9: I think what it does to help is, it helps you sum them up a little bit more 'cause I mean we pretty much put everything on Facebook and you can really tell a lot about a person from their Facebook so I think it's a really big part and it's a time saver... I don't know if that's judgmental or not, I have to be careful not to judge but you can definitely tell a lot about a person.

Interviewer: What would cause you to disapprove of a candidate due to their Facebook profile?

Respondent 9: Well, um, if I saw, you know, maybe pictures of them... or if they're a younger person and see pictures you know drunk or wasted with their friends you might

have to question them a little bit that part, um, I would definitely look at their fan pages and see what kind of, um, you know activities they like to be apart of to see if that's positive or negative for my business.

Interviewer: What about content vs. displaying information publicly?

Respondent 9: It's not that they are putting it up there publicly, everyone is entitled to be who they are, but it is going to be detrimental to my business then I'm going to have to make a judgment call.

Interviewer: Do you believe that a candidate's Facebook profile truly represents the candidate?

Respondent 9: From my experience, I would have to say yes. I mean my Facebook is totally... it represents me. I mean my Facebook page is mostly about yoga and my friends and family.

Interviewer: Do you see it as like when you're hiring somebody maybe that's more their personal side that wouldn't really be their work side or that's the way they are and that's the way they are going to be.

Respondent 9: I do. I just think that nowadays what you put on Facebook... I mean most people use Facebook not just for personal use but they use it as a tool in their business as well. I mean Green Monkey has a Facebook page, when we do special events we have Facebook pages and from my past jobs we've used Facebook professionally so I think we've crossed that threshold.

Interviewer: Would you be comfortable if a future employer examined your Facebook profile during the interview process?

Respondent 9: Wow, yeah. I think what you put on Facebook is you know pretty much public information so but you know first of all they'd have to be my, I'd have to befriend them. See what protects people is you don't have to befriend people you don't know. And I have privacy settings on mine so anybody can look at my pages.

Interviewer: Do you think that employers should disclose beforehand, let's say that the candidate didn't tell you to go look at their Facebook page, do you think that they should disclose beforehand such as the Fair Credit Reporting Act or the Criminal Background check?

Respondent 9: You know, I do. I do. I mean when you go to apply for a job, you're let known ahead of the time if you're going to have a background check, drug tested, and I think you should be told "hey we're going to check out you're social networks".

Interviewer: So what do you think about your generation maybe not really understanding generation-Y, as to why they have all that information publicly disclosed on Facebook and how your peers, other hiring managers you know how would they think?

Respondent 9: Well I think, you should really think before you talk. I mean the internet is a lot of public information out there; you maybe really need to think twice before what you put up on they internet that represents you. So I think someone in a younger generation that could be a downfall for them. They are not mature enough to think ahead and think of the future that might be a problem for younger people.

Interviewer: What about the ethics of using Facebook. Is it ethical using Facebook to sum up a candidate?

Respondent 9: Again, you have to befriend someone on Facebook so I don't think an employer or business they don't have a right to just look at your page. First of all they have to be your friend.

Interviewer: But what about those that don't have privacy settings.

Respondent 9: Well most people I know use privacy settings and again maybe its wisdom but you have privacy settings enabled on your Facebook.

Interviewer: Are you aware that sometimes a company's IT employee can go and hack through Facebook. Facebook is not impenetrable.

Respondent 9: I don't have anything out there that I'm scared or worried about for someone to see so it doesn't affect me personally. But I guess it could be a problem for some people.

Interviewer: You mentioned that you looked at their friends, do the kinds of friends someone befriends on Facebook important?

Respondent 9: It's not so much the friends you befriend, it just keeps it real. If you look at someone's pictures and say they put a bunch of pictures up of themselves and they're young kids out of college and they're all just getting drunk or wasted with their friends and you see a majority of those rather than them travelling or doing something more positive things in their life, you're going to have a judgment.

Interviewer: what about seeing grammatical errors or using incorrect English?

Respondent 9: No, I mean I'm guilty. Sometimes instead of writing Y-O-U, I'll just put the letter U so I wouldn't be such a stickler on things like that because you do use shorthand on Facebook.

Interviewer: What about other comments that people leave? Do you think that says something about the candidate?

Respondent 9: If you're going to sit there and take the time and look at someone's wall you might see some stuff that you don't want to see.

Interviewer: so that will affect them?

Respondent 9: I do.

Interviewer: Do you give consent to being recorded and used in this research?

Respondent 9: Yes, I consent that you have recorded me and using any comments for research.

Age: 40

Gender: female

Race, ethnicity: white, non-Hispanic

Download Citation on ResearchGate | At Face(book) value: Uses of Facebook in hiring processes and the role of identity in social networks | This study conducted 19 semi-structured in-depth interviews with employers from over six industries who use job candidate Facebook information in hiring processes. The results generated seven key findings, with three contextual themes (economy and timing, weight of Facebook) However, there is growing evidence that the value of Facebook in the educational context does not relate to formal learning at all, but to the "social networking" elements of the site. Findings are discussed with regard to the increasing role of technology-borne social information in everyday interpersonal interactions. View. Show abstract.