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Facebook as a Job Screening Tool: Are Sales Employers Discriminating Against Job Applicants based on their Facebook Profiles?

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Applicants based on their Facebook Profiles?

by

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Abstract

Social media networking sites are an exceptionally popular resource of self-expression in modern society. They allow friends, families and lovers across the globe to connect and stay in touch with one another. It has become increasingly common for hiring employers to utilize these sites as job-screening platforms. This research will explore how sales employers specifically examine job candidates' Facebook profiles. Furthermore it will examine whether or not they are discriminating against these applicants based on their Facebook content.

Key Terms

1. <u>Social Media Networking Sites (SNWs):</u> Websites that allow interaction through a variety of outlets including but not exclusive to: wall-posts, tweets, hashtags, picture tagging and the ability to share pictures, videos and music.

2. <u>Facebook:</u> Arguably one of the most commonly used SNWs today, Facebook is a website that allows its users to create individualized profiles where they can share status updates, photos, wall posts and more.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In modern society social networking sites have become an increasingly popular venue for

sharing photos and updates, keeping in touch with friends and most recently, job screening. An

overwhelming 89% of employers are now using social media sites as a means of researching job

applicants throughout the interviewing process (Jobvite, 2011). I examined how Facebook

pictures may sway employers' views of job candidates applying specifically for sales positions.

This research question is incredibly relevant as social media sites are becoming ever more

pervasive in today's culture and with employers needing to understand the implications of

referencing social networking sites. Sales employers were examined specifically because this is a

field where impressions are an integral part of the job, thus employers will be especially likely to

judge candidates by their Facebook pages.

Typically employers discriminate against job applicants who have Facebook pages that

exhibit unacceptable or inappropriate behaviors or lifestyles. Fifty-three percent of employers are

biased against candidates whose Facebook pages reveal provocative or inappropriate content,

while 44% discriminate against profiles exemplifying alcohol or drug abuse (Grasz, 2009). It is

interesting to explore whether or not sales employers conform to these norms. They may

associate a party lifestyle with an individual who is more social and outgoing – content that

normally dissuades employers from hiring an applicant may in fact be regarded positively in

sales.

Considering Facebook itself is relatively new, very little research has been conducted

involving how employers interpret its users' profiles. According to my research, few publications

exist pertaining to how sales employers specifically use Facebook to job screen applicants. A

moderate amount of research has been done that discusses whether or not it is ethical to search

people's Facebook profiles throughout the hiring process or if it is considered an invasion of privacy. Several articles have been published addressing the growing use of social networking sites as a hiring "tool," however they do not examine how employers interpret the candidates' pages. Finally, I reviewed the stream of research concerned with how people view themselves on Facebook. This thesis will act as a supplement to all of these areas of research while simultaneously introducing a sales oriented approach.

The results of this thesis are valuable for employers who hire sales employees. This study helps develop an increased awareness of the implications associated with using social networking sites as a job-screening tool. This is a critical part of the hiring process that employers should be intensely concerned with. A major goal of this thesis is to promote self-awareness in employers regarding their methodologies of hiring. As Facebook continues to permeate modern culture, employers must become better informed of how they utilize this website. This research satisfies that growing need and maximizes the hiring process.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Facebook and social networking sites are a growing area of heated discussion; however, because of their status as an emerging trend there has been relatively little research conducted on their use as an employment tool. The following articles reveal some of the angles that have been explored in this field of research.

The Effectiveness of Using Facebook As a Hiring Instrument

Surprisingly little research has been done involving the effectiveness of using Facebook as a job screening device. Donald H. Kluemper, who wrote the scholarly article "Future employment selection methods: Evaluating social networking websites," is one of the few that analyzes Facebook from this perspective. The intent of this paper is "to examine the feasibility of using applicant personal information currently available on SNW's to improve employment selection decisions" (Kluemper, 2010). The author further expands his hypothesis by examining specifically how reliable employers' interpretations were of candidates' intelligence, performance and Big-5 personality traits derived from information solely acquired from social networking websites. He used 63 judges and 6 subjects and in total accumulated 378 ratings. The results revealed that the judges were consistent in their ratings of the subjects and generally were able to differentiate between the top and low performers based on their Facebook profiles.

In fact, Kluemper suggests that social networking sites might be more reliable than other forms of personality assessments, such as interviews or resumes, because the candidate is more truly themselves on their Facebook profile than in these professional settings. Facebook reveals enough interaction with others and personal information to offer a fairly accurate illustration of the individual's personality. Groups the user has joined, comments made by the user, tagged photos, status updates and personal interests all reveal information regarding the Big-5

personality traits. According to research, "the magnitude of correlations between self- and other-rated traits assessed from Facebook profiles parallels that found in previous studies involving self- and other- rated personality," thus confirming that Facebook assessments can offer truly reliable information pertinent to a candidate's personality (Kluemper, Mossholder, Rosen, 2012). The research I have conducted examines how employers specifically assess these profiles.

<u>Ethical Debate Surrounding Facebook as a Job Screening Tool</u>

One of the more dominant areas of research regarding Facebook is whether or not it is considered ethical to job screen applicants through their profiles. Some believe that employers who seek this personal information are breaching the candidate's privacy rights while others argue that if the information is available that it is reasonable to make judgments based on it. Those who believe in protecting candidates' Facebook content are concerned that "these sites are not necessarily valid nor is there any way to ascertain the true identity of the person responsible for the information found" (Jones, Schuckman, and Watson, 2012). Furthermore, "unlike the interview process, there is no personal connection when sifting through information found on the Internet and therefore there is a greater likelihood for the information to be taken out of context or misused" (Jones et al. 2012). These misinterpretations can have devastating effects on the applicant's standing with the company. To exacerbate the matter, "twelve percent of hiring managers that use the sites said they were specifically looking for reasons not to hire the person" (Richard, 2012). Thus some employers are searching SNWs exclusively to seek information worthy of not hiring a candidate.

According to Jones et al., "nearly 50% of resumes (contain) factual errors." Despite this overwhelming problem of disparity, Jones et al. still argues that it is unethical to judge a candidate by their Facebook pages in conjunction with their resume:

> While Facebook has many different controls allowing users to limit and/or block the viewing of their individual profiles, many users have not taken advantage of these controls leaving them vulnerable to searches performed by curious employers. Additionally, studies are currently being conducted to determine the judgments made regarding the individuals who do use current privacy controls to restrict access to their profile. These studies hypothesize that the blocked accounts create the impression that the individual has something to hide, that will be argued as unethical…(Jones, et al., 2012)

Recent concern has emerged over an even deeper level of Facebook privacy invasion. According to Viscusi, "as part of (a job candidate's) ability to gain employment with some companies, prospective employers are demanding (their) Facebook password(s)" (2012). This would enable a hiring employer to view not only the applicant's entire selection of photos and statuses, but also their private messages. Companies enforcing this procedure argue that "the policy (is) designed to more effectively screen prospective applicants" (Levin, 2011). This information may encourage Facebook users to create profiles that "convey a professional image and underscore their qualifications" (Haefner, 2009). Since employers are becoming increasingly intrusive regarding SNWs, candidates may want to consider adjusting their Facebook pages accordingly. Although this thesis does not focus on the ethics of job screening, my research serves as a helpful resource for researchers looking to explore this area. They will be able to explain whether or not employers are being swayed by Facebook profiles and if this is penalizing innocent applicants.

<u>Facebook as a Growing Hiring and Job Screening Tool</u>

With Facebook being arguably the most popular website of the twenty-first century, it seems natural that employers would tap into this resource to facilitate the hiring process – but just how much are employers actually using Facebook? Jobvite reports that only 10.5% of companies do not take advantage of social networks to support their recruitment efforts. From 2009 alone there has been a 12.2% increase in the number of companies using Facebook and

other networking sites to enhance these efforts (Jobvite, 2011). Figure 1 below illustrates this

information:

Figure 1: Companies Using Social Networks or Social Media to Recruit
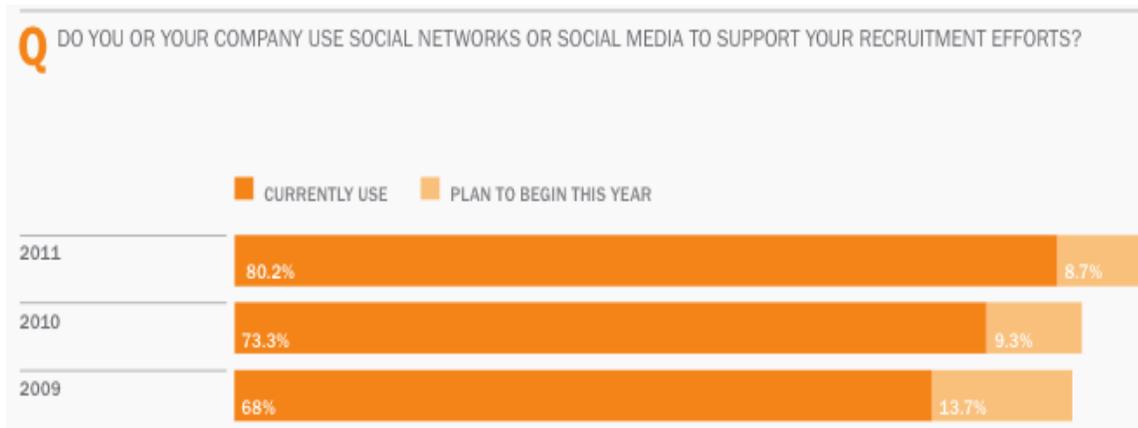
Probably the most relevant piece of information from this article is that from 2010 to

2011, the percentage of companies that "always search" candidates' profiles jumped from 32 to

45%. In only one year there was a 13% increase in this area, bringing the total percentage of

employers using social networking sites to almost half. Figure 2 below depicts these statistics:

Figure 2: How Often Companies Search Online Profiles
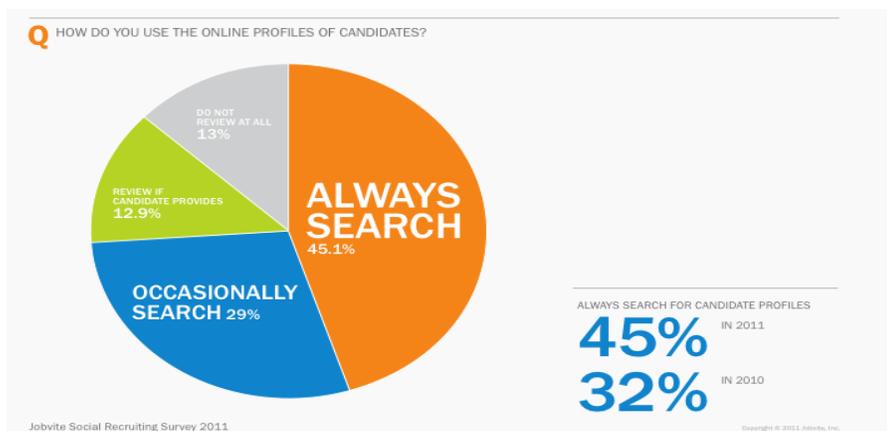
This information is critical in relation to my research as it emphasizes just how routinely Facebook is used by employers when hiring job applicants. My research focuses specifically on how sales employers interpret interviewees' profiles.

How Applicants Choose to Present Themselves on Facebook and How They
Think Employers View Their Profiles

Another area of study I researched discussed how people create a particular image of themselves on Facebook. According to Peluchette and Karl, students make a conscious effort to portray themselves in a certain light on Facebook: "those who believed they portrayed a hardworking image were unlikely to post inappropriate information, whereas students who felt they portrayed an image that was sexually appealing, wild, or offensive were most likely to post such information." A shocking amount of students, approximately 50%, have profiles that exemplify a party lifestyle. This includes profanity as well as comments and photos involving alcohol (Peluchette and Karl, 2008).

It has been argued that students readily post suggestive content on Facebook because they believe that their postings will not be seen by anyone outside of their own friend groups. Unfortunately, this is simply not the case. In 2006 careerbuilder.com conducted a study where they surveyed 1,150 hiring managers to see if they used social networking sites as a form of job screening. Out of the group that responded yes, 63% said they did not hire a person based on what they found on their social networking site (Peluchette and Karl, 2008). Despite the number of students who post risqué subject matter on Facebook, over 50% of surveyed students said they would not want employers viewing alcohol related content on their profiles. My research creates more awareness regarding whether or not inappropriate Facebook content is affecting employers' hiring decisions.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The intention of the methodology is to explore how sales employers' impressions of job candidates are swayed by Facebook profiles. Facebook is a social networking site that allows users to communicate with other Facebook "friends" via sharing pictures, status updates and comments. A typical Facebook profile will display information regarding an individual's age, their institution of study and place of employment. Users can further develop their profiles by adding information that pertains to their interests, skills, clubs and activities. Several users, particularly those belonging in the college demographic, use Facebook as a medium to expose their recreational activities. Although privacy settings are available for people to restrict their information to the public, a large percentage of users are not aware of these features or choose not to use them, thus employers frequently have access to job applicants' personal information. Additionally, some employers will send friend requests to applicants in order to gain access to Facebook content.

Research Design

A survey was administered to a variety of participants: their demographic information was obtained as well as their responses to fifteen scaled questions. The survey consisted of questions concerning two fictitious Facebook profiles and a resume. The participants viewed one of the two fictitious profiles – either the "party" profile or the "clean" profile. The "party" profile illustrated a lifestyle of going out and drinking whereas the "clean" profile showcased a lifestyle of going to church and doing volunteer work with children. Accordingly, the independent variable of this study was the Facebook profiles and resume while the dependent variable was the answers given in the surveys. The independent variable included information such as the

applicant's GPA, qualifications, choice of language and photos the applicants posted on Facebook.

Participants

Research participants varied moderately in demographics. Considering the participants were taken from a population of sales employers exclusively, the age range of these individuals ranged from 20-60 years. The participants were given the survey either through Facebook or Hotmail, meaning the number of participants was limited to the Facebook or Hotmail contacts of the researcher. To attain a wide variety of sales managers the researcher posted a status on Facebook requesting anyone who had sales management experience to contact them through Facebook or Hotmail. A diverse selection of managers replied, ranging from specialists in advertisement, retail and car dealerships sales. Age, gender, race and socioeconomic status were not taken into consideration throughout the selection process of these participants.

The sample population that took the clean Facebook profile survey had the following demographic results: the average age of the subject was 28.3 and 44% of the participants were male while the remaining 56% were female. The religious segmentation was as follows: four of the participants were Catholic, two were Baptist, one was Methodist, one was Evangelical Free and the remaining two were non-denominational Christians, thus 100% of the subjects were Christian. Nine of the participants were American while the remaining participant was from Croatia. Seven of the total subjects were from the state of Mississippi, one was from Texas and the last individual was from Illinois.

The demographics of the party Facebook profile population were as follows: the average age was 27.3. 70% of the population was male and 30% were female. Concerning religion: three of the participants were Atheist, three were Catholic, two were Baptist, one was Lutheran and

one was Presbyterian, thus seven were Christian believers. Eight of the participants were American – two were from Georgia, two from Illinois, one from South Carolina, one from Louisiana, one from Mississippi and one unspecified. The two international subjects were from France and Canada.

In all, 20 anonymous participants were administered surveys for obtaining the data and constituted the sample population. This number was deemed appropriate considering the novice nature of this research project. The individuals participating were not compensated for their involvement in the research and were selected and surveyed during the beginning of the year 2013.

The fictitious profile was constructed using Facebook photos of a companion of the researcher. While the fictitious profile contained actual Facebook photos, the name of the individual and identifying information was changed so as to protect his anonymity. Their companionship ensured a compliant, eager participant and easy accessibility for the researcher. Although his face and physical appearance were visible in the fictitious profiles, his anonymity was preserved from both the sales managers and research results. The participant was not formally recompensed for their involvement in the study. Photographs were obtained from his existing Facebook.

Procedure

The procedure of this study was relatively complex – a multitude of factors needed to be taken into consideration in order to ensure precise results. To begin, two fictitious Facebook profiles were created. One featured a college student who exemplifies a "party" lifestyle, while the second profile demonstrates a "clean and professional" lifestyle. Each profile was uniquely crafted through a manipulation of photos, comments and statuses. The student was representative of a potential job candidate.

The same individual was used in the creation of both profiles to prevent the sales managers from being bias. Furthermore, the student was male to help reduce any male employers potentially being swayed by sex appeal. Accompanying the fictitious profile pages was a fictitious resume. This resume was slightly above average: it was not outstanding to eliminate the chance that the participants may disregard the party profile, no matter how profane, because of the resume's excellence, nor was it noticeably below average to avoid the respondents ranking the individual solely based on their deplorable CV. The resume was created to be slightly above average by including a 3.1 GPA, a respectable showing of work and volunteer experience and a brief list of accolades.

Half of the employers viewed the party profile, while the remaining ten examined the upstanding user's page. All of the employers reviewed the same resume. Following these examinations, the employers answered a set of scaled questions regarding their perceived quality of the job applicant. Because the resume remained constant for both the party and clean-cut student, if the employers' views of the applicant varied, it would be solely based on the Facebook profiles. This answers whether or not Facebook pages are influencing employers'

opinions of job candidates. The participants viewed these profiles and resume by links provided through e-mail or Facebook.

Following the completion of these 20 surveys, the data was computed to obtain statistical information regarding the participants' answers. It was then further analyzed to expose the relationship between the results and the thesis inquiry. The survey featured demographic information and eleven questions that had a five-point scale of answers ranging from *strongly disagree, slightly disagree, neutral, slightly agree and strongly agree.* The eleven questions were developed to obtain several pieces of information: What kind of employee did the sales manager think the candidate was and how would they rate him? What were their personal views on alcohol consumption for recreational purposes? The survey was not piloted before being used in this study. An example of the survey, two profiles and resume is given below:

Survey

1. Age:

2. Gender:

3. Religious Beliefs (If Christian, please specify your specific denomination):

4. Nationality (If American, please specify your current state of residency):

5. I believe that this candidate would be a valuable addition to my business

6. I believe this candidate will be a reliable worker

7. This candidate will probably be late for work regularly

8. I am confident that this candidate will represent my company's values both in and out of the workplace

9. This candidate is intelligent

10. This candidate is a well-rounded individual

11. I believe that this candidate will be respectful towards his fellow workers

12. I would happily introduce this job candidate to my family under appropriate circumstances

13. Overall, I would rate this candidate as being: poor, slightly below average, average, slightly above average, exceptional.

14. I think drinking for recreational purposes is acceptable

15. My religion teaches me that getting drunk is sinful

Clean Profile

Party Profile

facebook 👥 💬 🌐 | Search for people, places and things 🔍 | 👤 Patrick Sullivan | Find Friends | Home ▾

🏫 Studies at University of Southern Mississippi
📅 Born on December 18, 1989
🔒 Add where you work
🏠 Add your current city

About   Friends   Photos   Map   Likes   ▾

📝 Status   📷 Photo   📍 Place   📖 Life Event

What's on your mind?

Patrick Sullivan
2 seconds ago 🌐

how am I supposed to study for this final again?
#20beerslater#dying

Like · Comment · Share

Patrick Sullivan
about a minute ago 🌐

Sigma Phi bid party tonight, BYOB

Like · Comment · Share

Patrick Sullivan
3 minutes ago 🌐

thirsty thursday tomorrow night! everyone be there
#allyoucandrink#$10cover

Like · Comment · Share

Patrick Sullivan
6 minutes ago 🌐

👤● Chat

Resume

PATRICK SULLIVAN
118 College Dr. #54113, Hattiesburg MS 39406
Phone 601-428-2229(M) • patrick.sullivan24@hotmail.com

EDUCATION
Bachelor of Science in Business Administration
Major: Business Administration
University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS.
- **Current 3.1 GPA**
- Will graduate in May 2013

WORK EXPERIENCE
Intern for Cintas   2012
Hattiesburg, MS
- Worked as a scholar intern specializing in customer service
- Developed strong customer relations skills
- Executed organizational skills by building customer folders and responding to customer inquiries in a timely manner
- Demonstrated a high level of communication skills, both verbally and written

Worked at The Grand Theatre   2011-2012
Hattiesburg, MS
- Worked as a cashier at ticket booth
- Interacted with a variety of customers.
- Sold tickets, answered questions and sometimes closed the theatre

VOLUNTEER WORK
Habitat for Humanity Volunteer   2012
- Helped reconstruct impoverished homes with Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity
Relay For Life   2011
- Helped organize and participated in Relay for life with fraternity

Participated in a variety of philanthropic activities with fraternity throughout college career such as Pancakes for Parkinson's, working at breast cancer awareness booth and campus cleanup.   2011-2012

HONORS AND ACTIVITIES
- Phi Eta Sigma Honor Society   2011
- Intramurals captain   2010-2012
- Member of Sigma Phi Epsilon Fraternity   2010-2012
- Leadership Scholar   2010-2012

Chapter 4: Results

The results of this survey were collected using Qualtrics.com. The clean Facebook profile coupled with the competitive resume yielded generally positive feedback from the sales employers. Seven of the participants believed that Patrick would be a valuable addition to their business and six believed that the candidate would be a reliable worker. The remaining three and four either strongly agreed with these statements or simply did not agree nor disagree. These results were not surprising; it can be assumed that the employers were impressed with Patrick's admirable 3.1 GPA and internship experience with Cintas. These accolades were supplemented with his alcohol-free profile that highlights Patrick's coaching and religious interests.

Similarly, six of the employers thought Patrick would arrive at work in a timely manner. The remaining four either strongly believed he would be punctual or had no opinion. Six of the subjects were confident that Patrick would represent the company's values both in and out of the workplace. Only one of employers disagreed with this statement. This response reflects favorably on Patrick's profile; his photos with children and accepting a Sportsmanship of the Year Award complement most companies' values of family and fair play. Seven of the employers either agreed or strongly agreed that Patrick is intelligent. This is apparent in his GPA and well-written resume. Nothing in his profile contradicts his evident intellectual capacities.

Eight of the subjects thought Patrick is a well-rounded individual. This response is most likely generated from both his Facebook profile and resume, which both illustrate an interest in a variety of activities including volunteer work and academics. All of the employers assumed Patrick would be respectful towards his fellow workers while seven believed he would be a suitable candidate to introduce to their families. Again, both his resume and Facebook profile speak volumes about Patrick's character and exemplify his interests in religion and children so

these numbers are not unexpected. Finally, seven of employers rated Patrick's overall competency as being slightly above average or exceptional, with no one ranking him as below average.

Of the sample population only four thought that drinking for recreational purposes is acceptable while the remaining six neither agreed nor disagreed. These numbers suggest that even if Patrick's profile had featured alcoholic beverages the employers would not have been deterred from hiring him. However considering their overall willingness to introduce him to their families it can be reasoned that his clean profile only increased Patrick's impressionableness. Three of the employers said that their religion teaches them that getting drunk is sinful while two disagreed with this statement. The remaining five neither disagreed nor agreed, thus seven of the sample were not heavily influenced by their religion when it comes to consuming alcohol. They may have regarded Patrick similarly had he displayed alcohol-related content on his profile. This general lack of judgment regarding alcohol may be a reflection of the sales industry.

Despite Patrick's alcohol-filled profile, three of the employers were still impressed by his resume enough to believe that he would be a valuable addition to their company. The remaining seven subjects neither agreed nor disagreed. Perhaps they were confused by the conflicting information between his resume and Facebook profile. Only two participants thought that Patrick would not be a reliable worker and would be late for work regularly. This is somewhat surprising given the "party-boy" nature of Patrick's Facebook profile. He clearly has a strong interest in activities that may limit his ability to be a dependable and punctual employee such as his aggressive alcohol consumption. Similarly, just three of the sales employers believed that Patrick would not represent their company values both in and out of the workplace. This again ties back

to the sales industry; it is possible that because drinking is an inherent part of a social job that drinking recreationally is also considered acceptable.

Nine out of ten employers believed that Patrick is intelligent, thus demonstrating that these employers were more concerned with his GPA and resume accolades than his Facebook profile. Correspondingly, nine of the sample population believed that Patrick is either a well-rounded individual or simply has no opinion. Eight had agreeable views when asked if he would be respectful towards his fellow workers. Arguably the most surprising response is that seven of employers did not disagree with the notion of introducing Patrick to their family. This is a strong indication that employers are primarily concerned with the content on a resume versus a Facebook profile. To further this argument, all of employers rated Patrick as being average to exceptional. Perhaps these positive responses are explained by the fact that eight of the sample population believed that drinking for recreational purposes is acceptable. This is somewhat contradicted by the four who said that their religion teaches them that getting drunk is sinful.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Overall it can be argued that sales employers are not swayed by applicants' Facebook profiles. They are predominately concerned with the content supplied on a candidate's resume. Whether an applicant has an impeccable Facebook profile or one filled with alcohol consumption it appears that as long as they can offer a company a legitimate resume they will be seriously considered for a position. These results may be affected by a younger demographic of respondents and their overall relaxed attitude regarding alcohol consumption. It appears that the second sample who viewed the party profile was particularly accepting of partying despite their somewhat conflicting religious beliefs. Although the majority of the participants were religious, it appeared that this had little impact on their views of alcohol-filled photos on Facebook.

Again, these results may be particularly skewed because of the sales demographic that partook in the survey. Typically employers seek candidates with exuberant personalities who genuinely love spending time with others. In a study conducted by Stevens and Macintosh, it was noted that "multiple regression results indicate that extraversion, openness to experience… are related to attractiveness of the activities within sales jobs" (2003). Alcohol is often times, although not exclusively, a pastime pursued by individuals with this personality type. Employers may form a subconscious correlation between alcohol consumption and outgoing personalities. Regardless of their views on drinking, it is evident that Patrick's Facebook profile only enhanced his overall marketability.

Certain limitations and weaknesses of this study include a small sample population and a focus on sales employers exclusively. Because of the lower undergraduate requirements of this thesis, the sample population consisted of only 20 participants. This reduced sample size decreases the accuracy of the overall trends and may weaken the implications of the data.

Although the purpose of this study was to specifically examine sales employers, the results cannot offer blanket implications to the workforce as a whole because of this focus. The results may be distorted to an industry that is partial to extroverted drinkers. Increasing the sample size and interviewing candidates outside of the sales industry can help future researchers easily overcome these inadequacies.

In spite of these potential influencers, the results are clear: regardless of your Facebook profile content, employers will take you seriously if you can hand them a serious resume. This is particularly pertinent for graduating college students. Their primary concern should be to develop a competitive resume throughout their undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. Acknowledging that this is the principal way employers judge job applicants it seems reasonable that candidates should focus on producing a standout resume above all else.

Sales employers can take away from this research that they may be inherently vulnerable to favoring seemingly extroverted personalities online. They may want to assess the implications of a candidate's drinking outside of appearing outgoing. There may not always be a direct correlation between a candidate being extroverted and enjoying the party scene. These results should encourage sales employers to develop a stronger sense of self-awareness throughout the job screening process and will allow them to maximize their applicant searches via SNWs. Finally, despite all of the warnings administered by schools and the Internet to carefully monitor the content on Facebook profiles, perhaps social media does not need to be taken as seriously as the upcoming generation has been advised.

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