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The Importance of Online Exposure when Applying for a Job

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Abstract

The rapid growth and development of information and communication technologies enabled the transition to a global and dynamic communication model. Among the many communication tools that have emerged, online social networks have proven to be the most popular. Its success has to do with the ability to converge several features into a single space, allowing users to share knowledge and experiences, maintain contact with their peers, as well as communicate freely and spontaneously. However, using these virtual platforms we are, inevitably, creating an online history that can affect our personal and professional lives. Facing a difficult and competitive job market, companies seek to capture the best talents, within their list of job candidates. In this context, companies are starting to screen online profiles to validate candidates' personal characteristics in a non-professional environment. The main purpose of this study is to understand the importance of the activities in online social networks when applying for a job, especially among recent graduates, who are seeking their first professional experience. Results show that even though recent graduates take caution when using social networking sites, especially Facebook, online exposure is not considered an important factor when undergoing employment processes.

Keywords: Online social networks; network society; recruitment; selection; internet; online exposure.

1. Introduction

The impetus of the human being to seek constant contact with his peers was a determining factor in the development of a dynamic and flexible communication model. Individuals seized new technologies and created new ways of communicating. Among the many tools that have emerged, online social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter or Hi5, have proven to be the most popular.

Online social networks can be defined as web platforms with several features that allow individuals to connect with others, share experiences and values, as well as maintain and strengthen ties (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). The backbone of all of them culminates in profiles with personal information about each user, such as the name, age and a list of friends who are also users. As the web, itself, became more interactive, this type of website has been evolving, gradually giving more power to its users, making it possible to upload and share any type of content (e.g. videos and photos), creating applications for personalized users' profiles, rating motives and books, playing games, creating groups with various purposes, among other available options.

However, privacy has always been a matter of importance in the analysis of social networking sites. In fact, individuals are no longer mere consumers. They are active participants in the process of creating and sharing any kind of information, challenging local and global dynamics, both in public or private domains. In the so-called web generation the paradigm changes: by default, what is published is visible to the network, as a whole, thus contributing to the redefinition of the concept of privacy.

The fact that individuals can now create and disseminate content results in a massive and unrestrained sharing of information about the individuals' personal lives. This practice is related with the fact that people want to have a visible online presence, and they achieve this by sharing their interests, aspirations and experiences.

But an excessive sharing associated with an increasingly transparent and public environment, may have impacts

on a person's image. It can result in the creation of an online reputation (which may really affect the social reputation), allowing other users to form opinions and make judgments about what is published, and one's self. Photographs, videos and comments, user interests, experiences, political opinions, sexual orientation and beliefs, can contribute to raise negative impressions or even false perceptions – with an impressive personal and social impact. Furthermore, internet users often lose control over the true audience of their online behaviour. Social networking sites constantly appeal to expanding the network by adding new friends online. Individuals often add co-workers and acquaintances from other contexts with whom it may not be appropriate to share certain content.

Another important element of social networking sites is the astronomical capacity of storage and content replication. These sites reflect a loss of control over the contents that circulate and how they can be used. For example, when using search engines - a reality in most of these sites - an excessive amount of information may come from publications, either by the user himself or by other members of the network that may have made references about a person.

Companies may use these platforms to validate each job candidate – by knowing the behaviours they reveal online. The popularity of these sites, the high levels of exposure, easy access and low costs, lead companies to use online social networks to validate candidates and look for signs that could prevent a possible hiring (Black & Johnson, 2012; Kluemper & Rosen, 2009). In this context, appears a new strategy of selection through social networking sites.

The widespread of new technologies, namely the Internet, to the business fabric, in the 90's, led to a strong organizational restructuring process. Since collaborators are, and always were, the elementary basis of any company, the redesign of new strategies of attraction and selection of candidates was also a priority (Reynolds & Weiner, 2009). Recruitment and selection processes should be aligned with the company's strategy, as it is intended to select candidates with specific competencies that allow them to achieve the organisational objectives.

Faced with an increasingly competitive and constantly changing market, companies felt the need to adopt strategies that allow an effective and efficient decision-making in the selection of the best professionals.

Today, companies need not only qualified candidates, but also professionals who are able to adapt themselves to the organisational culture, values and goals. Choosing the ideal candidate is the key to avoid costs with new processes of recruitment, integration and training.

So, the main concern of HR consultants are: (1) the candidate's lifestyle; (2) inappropriate comments and publications; (3) inappropriate videos, music, photographs and information; (4) offensive remarks about employers, clients and colleagues; (5) communication, that is, how a person writes and addresses to others in online platforms; (6) the groups to which a candidate is associated and his interests; and (7) the presentation of false information in the public profile. The majority of companies that use these platforms as a tool in the selection process, argue that they are collecting vital information for a better decision-making (Black & Johnson, 2012). But although the information found on these types of sites could be decisive in the selection process, it can also result in the creation of false perceptions about the candidate, negatively influencing the chances of being chosen. Often, the information that users have on their profiles is false or exaggerated, and sometimes individuals have no control over the information that is published in their name.

Although online social networks are excellent tools that allow new ways of communicating, they also pose risks to their users, particularly at a professional level. As the use of these platforms as a tool for the recruitment and selection process is a reality, with a tendency to increase, it is essential that candidates ask themselves if the information they make available in their profiles should be public, and whether this information could harm their professional careers, invalidating them as potential candidates, when applying for a job.

2. Main Objective

The fact that the most frequent users of online social networks are among the youngest people, usually individuals between 15 and 25 years, and that more companies are using these online platforms in order to validate their candidates, leads to an interest of understanding the importance given to personal online exposure.

Thus, the following question arises:

What is the importance given by recent graduates to online exposure during the application process?

Therefore, with this study we intend to:

- Verify which social networks are most frequently used and what activities are performed;
- Determine which elements are considered important when applying for a job;
- Validate which online actions are considered important in an application process;
- Analyse the importance of online exposure to recent graduates.

3. Method

Based on the literature review and the objectives defined, a questionnaire was prepared, with a distinct set of questions, using Likert-type scales, in which the minimum level corresponds to 1 (Never) and the maximum level to 5 (Very Frequently).

These questions were related to: sociodemographic characterization; the use of online social networks, particularly Facebook; perception of privacy and online caution and the importance given to online exposure. The survey form was made available on online platforms, such as social networking sites, and also distributed through personal and academic contacts.

The data collected was analysed with Excel and SPSS tools. At an initial stage, all the survey questions were analysed through descriptive statistics. In order to obtain the most significant dimensions of the elements considered important in a job application, and the perception of security and privacy, as well as online caution, we carried out some principal components analysis (PCA).

This study involved 101 participants (N = 101) of both genders, aged between 20 and 52 years, recent graduates of different education cycles. Regarding gender, 59,4% were female (N= 60) and 40,6% were male (N= 40). In relation to age approximately 92% were up to 35 years old (N = 93) and the remaining 8% were over 35 years old (N = 8). Also, 48.5% of the respondents were finishing their minor degrees (N = 49) and 48.5% were concluding their major degrees (N = 49).

4. Main Results

The results showed that Facebook is the online social network used by most participants, followed by YouTube and Instagram (cf. Table 1).

Table 1: Use of social networking sites

1.How often do you use the following social networking sites	Average	Standard Deviation
Facebook	4,71	,52
Youtube	4,42	,68
Instagram	3,36	1,71
Linkedin	2,91	1,23
Google+	2,45	1,29
Academia.Edu	1,47	1,04
Twitter	1,43	,91
Tumblr	1,33	,80
ResearchGate	1,26	,64
Myspace	1,13	,46
Badoo	1,12	,43
Orkut	1,05	,26

According to studies carried out by OberCom, Hi5 was the most popular but it was quickly exceeded by Facebook in the past few years (Cardoso et al., 2014).

Table 2: Activities carried out on Facebook

2. What do you usually do on Facebook?	Average	Standard Deviation
Online chatting	4,26	,93
Doing Likes on posts	4,03	,94
Send messages	4,00	1,01
Comment other posts	3,41	1,06
Share news or articles	3,04	1,11
Share music and videos	2,74	1,25
Join groups on Facebook	2,65	,81
Make posts on your own page	2,47	1,16
Join or support causes	2,43	,84

Share photographs	2,42	,99
Search and make new friends	2,31	1,03
Create new groups on Facebook	2,20	1,02
Screen for new job opportunities	2,15	1,13
Create and publicize new events	2,11	,99
Answer quizzes	1,97	1,07
Share your feelings about something	1,90	1,01
Personal Branding	1,88	,94
Play games	1,50	,86
Suggest friends	1,50	,77
Develop applications	1,28	,53
Send virtual gifts	1,22	,50
Share your CV	1,15	,38

Regarding the most frequent activities on Facebook (cf. Table 2), results show that, first of all, users use this type of virtual platforms to communicate online, via chats, and to send messages (Avg= 4,26), followed by liking posts (Avg= 4,03), making comments or posts (Avg= 4,00), sharing news and articles related to current issues like politics, human rights, and others (Avg= 3,41).

As to what concerns the importance of online activity, the majority tends to consider it as important for human resources technicians and specialists (Avg= 3,45), however, one part proves to be indifferent (cf. Table 3).

Table 3: Importance of Online Activities

3. What you post on Facebook is important to whom?	Average	Standard Deviation
You	3,55	1,01
Friends and family	3,50	,97
HR technicians and specialists	3,45	1,10
School / Work colleagues	3,35	,90
Acquaintances	2,86	1,04
Facebook users in general	2,34	1,08

There is a tendency not to value the activities performed on social networking sites in the application processes (cf. Table 4). Academic and organizational skills are the most valued. These results may be due to the lack of knowledge by recent graduates that human resources specialists use these platforms to validate candidates (Baym, 2010).

Table 4: Elements considered important in an application process

4. Which elements do you consider most important when applying for a job	Average	Standard Deviation
Organisation skills	4,41	,65
Foreign Languages	4,38	,66
Management and leadership skills	4,29	,61
Informatics skills	4,26	,59
Academic qualifications	4,25	,64
Years of professional experience	4,22	,73
Academic and scientific experience	4,17	,80
Complementary training (e.g. Workshops, post-graduations)	4,12	,65
Participation in Academic and scientific projects	4,07	,59
Academic and scientific publications	3,87	,84
Universities and Institutes	3,86	,80
extracurricular activities	3,76	,76
Subscribing Professional and Social networking sites	3,21	,97
Online Activity	3,00	,97

In relation to the importance given to online actions as evaluation elements when applying for a job (cf. Table 5), participants tend to value online communication (Avg= 3,93), sharing articles and news (Avg= 3,42), as well as comments

or publications related to human rights, politics, among others (Avg= 3,46). A Cross-tab study, conducted in 2010, indicates that HR technicians and experts also give a greater importance to online communication. The way users express themselves gains weight in what is the assessment of candidates' soft skills. Academic publications are other of the valued elements. Nonetheless, sharing personal information and photographs and the number of friends on the network are relatively unimportant to recent graduates, but for recruiters these can be signs that may prevent a hiring. (Black & Johnson, 2012, Hazelton & Terhorst, 2015).

Table 5: Online actions considered important in an application process

5.Which online actions do you find important when applying for a job	Average	Standard Deviation
Online Communication	3,93	,95
Write posts related to current issues like human rights, politics,	3,46	,94
Share news and articles	3,42	1,03
Join causes on Facebook	3,29	,98
Share personal information online	3,26	1,09
Write posts about companies, clients or colleagues	3,26	1,19
Share photos, music and videos	2,78	1,25
Join groups on Facebook	2,70	1,03
Share events	2,68	1,12
Liking other posts	2,62	1,00
Write posts about your personal life	2,54	1,19
Online friends (e.g. how many friends you have on Facebook)	2,33	1,09

With regard to issues such as privacy, security and online caution, the results showed there is indeed a concern with being online. Nevertheless, participants have a poor perception of possible consequences for their professional career (Avg= 2,82). These findings highlight the lack of knowledge about the use of online social networks in the selection process.

Table 6: Perception of privacy, security and online caution

6. Perception of privacy, security and online caution	Average	Standard Deviation
I know how to change Facebook privacy settings	4,51	,64
I have already changed my profile privacy settings	4,48	,61
I am careful with the friend requests I accept	4,43	,62
I know how to change Facebook security settings	4,41	,80
I am careful with the posts I do on my Facebook page	4,34	,71
I am careful with the information I share on Facebook	4,30	,76
I am careful with what I publish online	4,21	,98
I am careful with my comments	4,15	,84
I have already changed my profile security settings	4,12	1,03
What I share on my Facebook page can undermine my personal life	3,72	1,27
I know Facebook's Security Policy	3,31	1,07
What I share on my Facebook page can undermine my professional career	2,82	1,37

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The evolution of new information and communication technologies led to enormous challenges in our society. The Internet plays a leading role in a new technological paradigm, which resulted in profound changes in the way we communicate. In a highly competitive market, companies felt the need to innovate and define alternative plans of action. As far as recruitment and selection processes are concerned HR specialists and experts defined new strategies to seek the best talent in the market. The Internet thus has provided new ways of mediating the relationship between companies and candidates, overcoming some the main limitations of these processes.

At the same time, individuals have seized new technologies to generate new ways to communicate and maintain their relations. Among the many communication tools that have emerged, online social networks have been gaining prominence over the last few years. These spaces are perceived as an extension of the offline world, in which individuals

can show who they are by sharing their experiences and beliefs, as well as communicate freely and spontaneously, challenging the concepts of space and time, public and private.

However, it is necessary to take into account the challenges that may arise from an inadequate use of new technologies, especially in a professional context.

Do to the popularity, high levels of exposure, easy access and low costs of online social networks, like Facebook, more companies are turning to these type of sites in order to validate candidates and look up for signs that could prevent a possible hiring. It is therefore our interest to understand the importance given to online exposure when applying for a job in the eyes of those who are now starting to look for the first professional experience.

In order to achieve the objectives outlined in the present study, we analysed the main online social networks, as well as the online activities performed, the importance given to online exposure and the perception of privacy and risks online, especially on Facebook. This choice was not random. According to a study carried out by OberCom, Facebook appears as the social network with the largest number of users (Cardoso, et al., 2014), and our results reinforced this data.

We found that, among the recent graduates we surveyed, the most used social network is Facebook, followed by YouTube and Instagram, and that they focus on the activities that allow direct contact between users. These results are similar to those found in other studies carried out by Obercom (Cardoso, et al., 2014). In addition, the main reasons that induce people to subscribe to this type of sites are the ability to maintain relationships at a distance and to reinforce ties created offline (Cardoso, et al., 2012).

With regard to the importance given to online exposure as an element of evaluation in a job application process, most participants consider that the activities performed online may be an important factor for HR specialists. However, online presence is considered somewhat indifferent on a job application process. Participants also disagree with the fact that online activity may harm them in a professional context. The tendency is to value academic competencies and those developed in an organizational context, believing that these will be decisive in a possible application process.

Even with some limitations, the results obtained allowed to verify the proposed objectives, as well as to break ground in the field of online exposure research and its importance as an element of evaluation in job application processes. This study allowed us to enrich knowledge about the impacts of new technologies on human resource processes, a topic still under-explored, drawing attention to the importance of raising awareness for new trends in recruitment and selection, as well as boosting the use of online social networks for a successful professional future.

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