



# Using social networking websites as a selection tool: The role of selection process fairness and job pursuit intentions

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## ABSTRACT

A growing trend in the hospitality industry is openly encouraging applicants to join their social networking sites as part of their recruitment process (Dolasinski et al., 2010; Madera and Chang, 2011). However, there is a dearth of studies examining how applicants perceive and react to the use of social networking websites in the recruitment and selection process. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to examine how applicants react to the use of social networking websites as a selection tool. Using experimental methods, participants attending a career fair for hospitality jobs completed a questionnaire after reading about a hospitality company that does or does not use social networking sites in the selection process. The results showed that perceived fairness and job pursuit intentions of applicants were lower for an organization that used social networking websites as a selection tool than an organization that did not use social networking websites as a selection tool.

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## 1. Introduction

Social networking websites, such as Facebook and Twitter, have been increasingly popular over the past years. A recent study found that 90% of respondents between the ages of 18–24 reported having a Facebook account (Withiam, 2011). Individuals can often share personal information, such as pictures, music, videos, blogs, displaying interests and personal demographic information (e.g., age, ethnicity, religion, sexual-orientation, marital status) using these sites. Given the popularity and availability of accessing such personal information, many US employers have started to use social networking websites to screen job candidates. In particular, a study found that 45% of US employers were using social networking websites to screen applicants, and 11% of employers had plans to start using them for screening future applicants (Shea and Wesley, 2006). A similar study found that 50% of human resource professionals used an internet search (e.g., Google) to screen applicants and reported that 20% of the searches led to disqualifying applicants based on the searched content (Zeidner, 2007). Human resource professionals have indicated that using social networking websites to screen applicants is both an acceptable and increasingly important practice to carefully screen applicants (Clark and Roberts, 2010).

Research in the hospitality industry has shown a similar trend. For example, in a study of hospitality recruiters, Madera and Chang (2011) found that although the recruiters reported that the

initial purpose for developing a social networking account was for customer service and marketing, the recruiters reported that they use social networking sites for recruitment purposes. Moreover, 54% reported using social network sites to screen applicants. Large hospitality employers are openly encouraging applicants to join their social networking sites as part of their recruitment process (Dolasinski et al., 2010). By joining hospitality organizations' social networking sites, applicants are providing employers with access to their accounts.

Although this phenomenon has become increasingly popular, there is a dearth of studies examining how applicants in the hospitality industry perceive and react to the use of social networking websites as part of the selection process. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to examine how applicants react to the use of social networking websites as part of the selection process. In particular, the current study examined how the perceived fairness of a selection system is influenced by the use of social networking websites as a selection tool and how the perceived fairness influences job pursuit intentions. Overall perceived fairness provides a theoretical background for examining applicants' reactions the use of social networking websites as a selection tool. Overall perceived fairness involves how fair an applicant perceives the procedures and methods used in selecting employees (Cullen and Sackett, 2003; Schminke et al., 2000).

Studying applicants' perceived fairness to organizations using social networking websites in the selection process is important for several reasons. First, as more hospitality organizations are openly using social networking websites for recruitment purposes (Dolasinski et al., 2010; Madera and Chang, 2011), it is important for hospitality firms to understand how applicants might

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potentially react to using social networking sites in the selection process. Second, research examining applicants' perception of the selection process shows that applicants make organizational attributes based on the selection process, such that organizations that have selection systems that are perceived to be invasive are also perceived to be less attractive. As such, organizational attractiveness is lower when the selection process is negatively perceived (Rynes and Cable, 2003). Third, applicant reactions are also related to legal complaints; particularly when applicants perceive a selection system to be invasive or inappropriate (Smither et al., 1993). Fourth and last, the hospitality industry has been slow in a researching recruitment and selection methods that are widely used in other industries (Hinkin and Tracey, 2010; Lucas, 2002; Lucas and Deery, 2004). In fact, there is a scarcity of research in hospitality examining applicant reactions to selection methods.

## 2. Literature review and conceptual development

### 2.1. Social networking websites as a selection tool

Social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, allow individuals to post and share personal information, which has led to many US employers to use social networking sites to screen job applicants (Shea and Wesley, 2006; Withiam, 2011). A reason for using social networking sites to screen employees is that employers might want to verify information provided by applicants. For example, ADP Screening and Selection Services found that applicants do falsify their information on applications, such as their employment record, education, and credentials or licenses (Levashina, 2009). Other reasons for using social networking sites for selection purposes is that social networking sites have some advantages over traditional human resource tools, such as being accessible without costs (Jacobs, 2009) and are perceived to be reliable sources by users (Kluemper and Rosen, 2009). Thus, social networks provide employers with additional information they can use to screen applicants.

Another possible factor that drives employers to search for negative information of applicants on social networking sites is negligent hiring; that is, employers can be legally responsible for employees who cause harm to the third party (i.e., customers). Employees represent an important resource for organizations and selection of employees plays a key role in developing a competitive advantage. The information that job candidates post on social networking sites might be evaluated by how positive and negative the information is perceived. One study found that 35% of employers reported rejecting a candidate based on the content the candidate posted on their social networking profile; however, only 18% of employers reported hiring an applicant based on the positive content posted on their social networking profile (Careerbuilder.com, 2009).

Hence, the employers' best interest is to gain as much information of the applicants as possible to avoid negligent hiring. In the selection process, different laws (e.g., Title VII, the Americans with Disabilities Act) limit information that might be necessary for employers (Byrnside, 2008). In fact, past employers are often afraid to provide negative information, because of the increasing litigations in which employers are accused of defamation for providing negative information about employees to their new employers. Employers' lack of information from traditional selection tools and fear of negligent hiring can be reasons why employers use social networking sites to look for additional information of the applicants (Sprague, 2007).

### 2.2. Perceived process fairness

Organizational justice theory (Greenberg, 1987, 1990) provides a theoretical framework for examining how applicants react to

organizations using social networking websites as a selection tool. Organizational justice is concerned with the perceived fairness of procedures and outcomes in organization, such as workplace policies, interactions, and procedures used that affect outcomes (Cullen and Sackett, 2003; Schminke et al., 2000). Although organizational justice has been commonly divided into three categories: distributive (i.e., the fairness of what one receives based on the distribution from decisions), procedural (i.e., the perceived fairness of formal decision-making practices), and interactional justice (i.e., to quality of interpersonal treatment received during implementations of a procedure), recent research suggests that an overall sense of fairness is more predictive of reactions than the individual fairness perceptions (Ambrose and Schminke, 2009; Greenberg, 2001; Shapiro, 2001). That is, overall perceived fairness "provide a more complete understanding of justice in organizational settings" (Ambrose and Schminke, 2009, p. 491).

Fairness heuristic theory explains how individuals make overall fairness judgments, as well as why people use fairness judgments (Lind, 2001); this theory states that individuals create a general heuristic about the fairness of an organization. This general fairness heuristic is formed during the first encounter with justice-relevant events, such as the recruitment and selection process. Over time, as individuals encounter other types of justice judgments, they create fairness heuristics for each organizational context.

One major component of the theory is the idea that individuals create a fairness heuristic when they are first confronted with justice-relevant information, and once made this heuristic is hard to change (i.e., primacy effect). This first process creates a fairness heuristic based on the first specific justice encountered (e.g., a procedural fairness heuristic) and at the same time a general fairness heuristic is formed. This suggests that the first relevant information exerting the greatest influence on feelings of overall fairness, creating a primacy effect. The general fairness heuristic influences subsequent judgments of justice.

In the context of employee selection, research shows that when making fairness ratings of selection tools, applicants examine the policies, decisions, and procedures used to make hiring decisions. The perceived validity of a selection tool is particularly important in the context of examining applicant reactions because research shows that applicants have favorable reactions to selection tools that are strongly related to the job content, such as work samples or simulations, as opposed to personality inventories and tests of cognitive ability, which are perceived to be less related to the job (Ryan and Ployhart, 2000).

Procedures and decisions are perceived to be fairer when they consistent, free from personal bias, and based on accurate and relevant information (Anderson, 2003). Research has also examined how the interpersonal treatment received during the process of a selection procedure affects fairness perceptions (Chapman et al., 2005). In particular, providing knowledge, adequate accounts, and explanations about the procedures is how informational justice is formed (Bies and Tyler, 1993). In addition, the applicants' perceived job relatedness of a selection tool is an important reaction to selection systems (Rynes and Cable, 2003).

Invasion of privacy is an important procedural dimension that is relevant to selection techniques that are internet-based (Harris et al., 2003). That is, in the context of using social networking websites as a selection tool, privacy is a relevant concern for applicants' perceived fairness. Applicants' privacy concerns involve the process of how information was collected, if unauthorized information is obtained, and if improper access is used to obtain personal information (Smither et al., 1996). Research has shown that privacy concerns are significantly related to the perceived fairness of selection tools, such that perceptions of fairness were higher when invasion of privacy was perceived as low (Alge, 2001; Bauer et al., 2006; Eddy et al., 1999). Thus, research suggests that

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