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The relationship between recruiter characteristics and applicant assessment on social media

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ABSTRACT

Given the growing practice of social recruiting, this study is an investigation of how job applicant assessment on social media differs based on recruiter characteristics. In particular, this study touches upon how the assessment of both non-professional and professional categories of content on job applicants' social media differs by recruiters' gender and national culture, and whether these characteristics and how recruiters view non-professional content on social media are associated with the recruiters' perceived tendency to exclude applicants from the recruitment process. The theoretical foundations of this study were based on the selectivity model and the existing literature on national culture. The analysis of data collected from 256 Italian and Dutch recruiters using ANCOVA and logistic regression indicated that the assessment of job candidates' non-professional content differed by recruiters' culture but not by their gender, whereas the assessment of job candidates' professional content on social media differed by recruiters' gender but not by their culture. Factors related to the recruiters' perceived tendency to exclude candidates from the recruitment process were also identified. The findings of this study provide practical implications for recruiters and job seekers, and present new suggestions for future research.

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1. Introduction

The rise of social media technologies has led to their use in several organizational functions (A. El Ouirdi, El Ouirdi, Segers, & Henderickx, 2015; Khang, Ki, & Ye, 2012). Social media, with their different categories (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) and diverse user base (M. El Ouirdi, El Ouirdi, Segers, & Henderickx, 2014), are also increasingly becoming an integrated part of the recruitment process (Gibbs, MacDonald, & MacKay, 2015; M. El Ouirdi, El Ouirdi, Segers, & Henderickx, 2014). Recruiters employ social media to actively source candidates, disseminate job ads, tap into a large pool of talent, and assess applicants among other uses (Caers & Castelyns, 2010; Klier, Klier, Rebhan, & Thiel, 2015; Melanthiou, Pavlou, & Constantinou, 2015).

Social media-based assessment of job candidates is different from more traditional practices in several ways. First, employer searches on social media do not necessarily actively elicit job-related information; second, there is a potential mismatch between the purposes of some social media and an organization's use of data drawn from these platforms; and third, it is difficult to structure or standardize social media-based assessments (Roth, Bobko, Van Iddekinge, & Thatcher, 2013). Additionally, recruiters find both professional and non-professional content on social media in larger amounts than usually contained on an applicant's CV. Social media content gives recruiters an additional source of information to assess a candidate's fit with the organization and the job (Chiang & Suen, 2015), and to formulate applicant-related dispositional attributions that may influence interviews and subsequent hiring decisions (Knouse, 1989). Existing research has shown, for example, that relevant education produces more positive perceptions of competence and potential and predicts salary (Knouse, 1994), and that detailed work experience is associated more with employability compared to activities and educational experiences (McNeilly & Barr, 1997). Little is known, however, about the assessments of both non-professional and professional social media content of job applicants, how they differ by recruiter

characteristics, and whether they are associated with the recruiters' perceived tendency to exclude candidates from the recruitment process.

The primary research questions addressed in this study are therefore as follows: 1) do the assessments of non-professional and professional content on job applicants' social media profiles differ by recruiters' gender and national culture?; 2) is the recruiters' tendency to exclude applicants from the recruitment process related to how the former assess non-professional content on social media?; and 3) does the recruiters' tendency to exclude applicants from the recruitment process differ by the former's gender and national culture? The answers to these research questions make a number of contributions to the literature. First, this study contributes to filling an overall gap that exists between practice and research on social media-based assessments (Roth et al., 2013; Van Iddekinge, Lanivich, Roth, & Junco, 2013). Second, this investigation covers various items of both non-professional and professional content on social media which were not combined in previous studies on the topic. Third, this study investigates the possible linkage between social media-based assessment and the recruiters' perceived tendency to exclude applicants from the recruitment process, though without making any causality claims.

This article is structured as follows: a brief overview of the literature on screening job candidates' social media profiles is presented first, followed by a section presenting the research hypotheses pertaining to the associations between recruiter characteristics and applicant assessments on social media, as well as to the factors associated with the recruiters' perceived tendency to exclude applicants from the recruitment process. Next, the methods section details survey design and dissemination, followed by data analysis and the discussion of the findings. This article is concluded with highlights of its limitations and implications, as well as suggestions for future research.

2. Background

2.1. Recruitment practices in Italy and the Netherlands

Italy and the Netherlands have several similar recruiting practices. According to recent reports, 61% of Italian recruiters consider online professional networks as the most effective tools for employer branding, and 42% find these networks to be an essential and long-lasting trend (LinkedIn, 2016). Between 2012 and 2015, LinkedIn's yearly reports indicated increased rates of Italian recruiters who consider online social networks as the most important source of quality hires (LinkedIn, 2016). Similarly, social professional networks accounted for 76% of white collar hires in 2015 in the Netherlands, while other Internet job boards were the source of 50% of such hires. Furthermore, in the same year, 48% of Dutch recruiters reported recruiting passive candidates, versus 53% of Italian ones, and in both countries this practice was below the global average of 61% (Linkedin, 2015). Also, in both countries, recruiting is increasingly becoming like marketing (Linkedin, 2015).

Italy and the Netherlands also have other mutually different recruiting practices. For example, while 71% of Dutch organizations recruit students as young professionals, versus a global average of 79%, Italy has the highest rate of student recruiting amounting to 90% (Linkedin, 2015). Furthermore, 43% of recruiters in Italy find that the biggest obstacle to recruiting talent was compensation (LinkedIn, 2016), while 57% of Dutch recruiters believe that competition was their biggest challenge in the war for talent (Linkedin, 2015).

2.2. Social media in pre-employment screening and assessment

In the existing literature on social media use in recruitment, empirical research remains scant on their use in applicant screening in particular (Ollington, Gibb, & Harcourt, 2013). Existing research on social media-based screening has covered three main points: the advantages of this practice, the types of social media content noticed and assessed by recruiters, and the legal and ethical aspects related to screening candidates on social media.

First, social media-based screening has several advantages. Recruiters who use social media in screening report that it takes little time and effort and provides more information than résumés do (Tufts, Jacobson, & Stevens, 2014). Recruiters also associate transparency with screening job applicants on online social networks, where personal data are readily available for all to see (Ollington et al., 2013), and where the applicant's real person could be discovered instead of the excessively managed or deceptive self presented in résumés and job interviews (Berkelaar, 2014). Additionally, social media enable recruiters to approach potential candidates and ask for relevant information for a specific job, thus allowing the latter to either choose to be included in the recruitment process by providing the requested information, or opt out by not answering the recruiters back (Ollington et al., 2013).

Second, recruiters notice and assess several types of social media content on candidates' profiles. Previous research indicated that job seekers share both professional and inappropriate content on their social media profiles, despite having online professional image concerns (M. El Ouirdi, Segers, El Ouirdi, & Pais, 2015). Both practitioner and academic literature seem to converge on the favorability of professional content on an applicant's social media account, and the negativity of non-professional content even when it is not work-related. For instance, a job applicant with either a family-oriented or a professional-oriented social networking page receives more favorable ratings from recruiters than an applicant with an alcohol-oriented profile (Bohnert & Ross, 2010). Conversely, recruiters gave the lowest ratings to individuals with Facebook profiles that contained profane language, or photos that showed them at parties or drinking (Van Iddekinge et al., 2013). Furthermore, individuals with unprofessional social media content tend to have lower chances of being hired and receive lower salary offers (Bohnert & Ross, 2010).

Third, scholars have discussed several legal issues and ethical dilemmas related to social-media based pre-employment screening. Researchers primarily discussed potential discriminatory practices by employers during the recruitment process, and privacy invasion concerns as a result of accessing personal information of job candidates on social media, especially under U.S. laws (Brown & Vaughn, 2011; Davison, Maraist, & Bing, 2011; Elefant, 2011; Slovensky & Ross, 2012). As a result, researchers provided managers and recruiters with legal and practical guidance for appropriate use of social media in screening and hiring decisions (Davison, Maraist, Hamilton, & Bing, 2012), including resorting to third-parties to perform social media-based screening (Ebnet, 2012).

3. Recruiter characteristics

The present study focuses on two main recruiter characteristics, namely gender and national culture, and examines their relationships with the assessment of applicants' non-professional and professional social media content, as well as with the recruiters' perceived tendency to exclude applicants from the recruitment process. The association between this tendency and the recruiters' assessment of applicants' non-professional social media content is also examined.